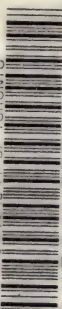


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NOVELS

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MIDAS AND SON

NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE

SONIA

THE SIXTH SENSE

SHEILA INTERVENES

THE RELUCTANT LOVER

WHILE I REMEMBER

TEX: A CHAPTER IN THE LIFE OF
ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

VINDICATION

A NOVEL :: :: By
STEPHEN McKENNA ::



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BOOK ONE



Vindication

PROLOGUE

" . . . One fine frosty day,
My stomach being empty as your hat,
The wind doubled me up and down I went.
Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
(Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)
And so along the wall, over the bridge,
By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there . . .
I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house,
Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici
Have given their hearts to—all at eight years old."

—ROBERT BROWNING: *Fra Lippo Lippi*.

Carlton House Chambers, Bury Street, St. James', when seen embossed on the thick, rough-edged note-paper which Mr. Jorley supplied to his socially ambitious tenants, always looked more impressive than *Carlton House Chambers* when at length discovered by his tenants' baffled and despairing friends. *Bury Street* was then found to be a misleading euphemism for the nameless alley which leads far from that thoroughfare to the mews behind; *Carlton House Chambers* were revealed as an upper part over a newsvendor's shop, with a tavern on the one side and a grocer's on the other. A scarred and rain-streaked sign-board announced unceasingly, whether the house were empty or full, that there were gentlemen's chambers to let and that particulars would be supplied by Mr. S. Jorley. It was equally characteristic of his tenants and of their visitors that the name of the house did not obtrude itself on the street but was disclosed in confidence if the caller could be presumed to come in good faith and not in quest of an overdue account.

This modesty of bearing spread downwards from the chambers to the shop of the newsvendor and, on either side, to the tavern and to the grocery store, till a fanciful passer-by could discern on the dingy face of each house a mute appeal to be left alone. Three times in ten years the grocer had been fined for allowing

his premises to be used by the gentlemen's gentlemen of the neighbourhood for purposes of gambling; the tavern-landlord was under notice that his licence would be taken away at the next complaint; and the newsvendor openly declared that a man might as well retire from business as continue to be prosecuted for selling indecent literature. "*Let us alone!*" besought the lack-lustre windows; "*let us alone!*" creaked the peeling, dejected doors.

"What the 'ell do people want to come bothering *me* for?" said Mr. Jorley aloud, as in list slippers and baize apron he shuffled up from the kitchen in answer to a peremptory ring.

The day's air and exercise had already been won in his unchanging ramble through St. James' Square and Carlton House Terrace; his tenants' dogs were slumbering before their respective fire-places; and Mr. Jorley, with pipe, paper and jug of beer, was preparing to follow their example. Stooping to a spy-hole in the newsvendor's shop, he observed a group of six men, too distinctive to be plain-clothes detectives and too distinguished to be duns.

"Mr. Britton?" enquired one, whose age had, apparently, caused him to be elected spokesman.

"No one o' that name 'ere," answered the landlord, with his eyes set sullenly on the undulating waistcoat and heavy gold chain of his interlocutor.

"Nonsense! I know this place perfectly well. And Mr. Britton has asked us to call." Puffing a little, the elderly man tugged from his breast-pocket a letter addressed to "*Messrs. Barratt and Howe, Chartered Accountants, Conduit Street*" and signed "*Arthur Britton.*" "I'm Mr. Barratt, and these gentlemen are acting with me. Our appointment is for three o'clock."

"*Britton!*" cried Mr. Jorley. "I didn't 'ear the name right." Gratified that he had protected his tenant from a surprise attack, he called into the warm, mouse-scented darkness of the basement: "Missus! Youlalo! Gen'lemen to see the admiral."

Two minutes later Mr. Barratt and his colleagues were disposed, in an atmosphere of spilt whisky and stale cigar-smoke, about a long table in the first-floor chambers, obeying—as best they could—the injunction of Mr. Britton, who was an admiral only by the jocose courtesy of his friends, that they should make themselves at home, while he himself, though still far from completely recovered from luncheon, saw to their comfort by scouring the chambers for refreshments and to their privacy by warning his daughter that she must leave them undisturbed.

"S'important marrer business," he explained thickly in the door-way of her bedroom.

Gloria Britton turned from an empty trunk to the piles of summer clothes on her bed.

"I hope it's something good this time," she murmured. "I've nothing fit to wear, you know."

"'Shall shee, shall shee. Don' wan' raise falsh hopes," said her father, as he turned back in the direction of the dining-room.

At the door he held out one hand to see how much it trembled ; resigned to the result, he scrutinized his appearance in a narrow strip of looking-glass and sighed gently at the reflection of mottled skin and protuberant eyes. The line of his features, though now obscured by puffiness, remained good ; the hair, though silvering at the temples, continued abundant ; but dissipation was unfitting him to live for ever by his wits, and age was gnawing at the heart of his popularity.

"And, when I'm used-up, . . . *God* may know," he muttered. "*I* don't." A hum of conversation among his creditors broke in on the mournful reverie. "Gloria's old 'nough lend hand, I should have thought. . . . Well, here goes !"

Throwing open the door, with an innocent cheerfulness borrowed from Sir Charles Hawtrey, he entered smiling and apologetic. The reception accorded to him, unlike any that had ever greeted Hawtrey's first appearance, convinced him that his visitors were equally on their guard against charming or trifling ; and, with trained sensitiveness to atmosphere, he dropped into the empty chair at the head of the table and bent a stern glance on the papers before him.

"Nine thousand, four hundred and eighteen," he read out slowly and was agreeably surprised to find himself master of his articulation.

"That is all that's been proved so far," explained Mr. Barratt. "I only put myself in touch with your principal creditors. The moment a thing like this gets talked about. . . ."

"Quite so." Mr. Britton ran his eyes once more down the list of names and amounts. He felt that it would have been more businesslike to say "Quite" and said it now. "Quite. Er . . . quite." Then he looked enquiringly round the table : "Well, gentlemen ?"

A young man at the far end, still with his reputation to make as the terror of creditors' meetings, cleared his throat and leaned towards Mr. Barratt with his pencil to the foot of the statement.

"No figure has been filled in for the assets," he pointed out.

"There *are* no assets," proclaimed Mr. Britton. "I thought that was understood. . . . Well, gentlemen?"

"'Uv you unny pwopozal to māg?" drawled a spectacled Levantine, whom Mr. Britton divined quickly to be the most vindictive of his enemies. "I wepwezent Zimonides and Gompany."

"Simonides? Oh, yes. Cigars." Mr. Britton referred to his list and then rose to fetch a silver box from the side-board. "Four-thirty-seven-ten. I'd no idea it was as much as that. I wish you'd try one and tell me whether you consider that a cigar in good condition. What your people won't understand is that I want cigars to smoke *now*; I've no room here to mature them. If there's not an immediate improvement, I shall really have to make a change. Seeing the price you charge . . ."

"It's wather beside the boind to talg about bwice, isn't it?" asked the Levantine, tracing from memory the profile of Mr. Jorley in the dust which Mr. Jorley had left undisturbed on the rarely-used mahogany table.

"Not if you hope to be paid," said Mr. Britton shortly, as he cut his cigar and turned fastidiously to the West-European side of the table.

"Yes, but how long, Mr. Britton?" asked the young man who had hoped to find assets in the admiral's statement. "I represent Troubridge and Moffatt; and your account for wines and spirits goes back four years. We can't stand out of our money indefinitely."

"Troubridge and Moffatt; three thousand two hundred and sixty-four," read Mr. Britton. "No, I don't suppose you can. Quite. It's not business. That's my biggest liability, isn't it? I suppose you'll have to stand the racket of being the petitioning creditor, though I'm hanged if I see what you'll get out of it."

A murmur of voices rose from the representatives of Savile Row and Bond Street. "Public policy," muttered his hatter; "S-self-defence," stammered an indignant shirt-maker.

"Have you no proposal of your own to make?" asked Mr. Barratt.

"Not until I hear whether these gentlemen are going to apply for a receiving-order against me," answered Mr. Britton, leaning back in his chair and throwing one leg over the other. "I warn you and I warn them that they'll be putting themselves to needless expense and getting not one farthing for their pains. When I'm assured that no more solicitors' letters are coming my

way, we can begin to talk ; but I can't allow myself to be . . . threatened."

A whispered consultation broke out at the far end of the table, stretching out to embrace those nearest to Mr. Britton till he strolled considerably to the window and left his creditors to their decision.

"There are smiles . . . that make you happy." . . .

In the next room he could hear Gloria whistling to herself as she slammed cupboard-doors and dragged more trunks from the narrow landing. She, too, must be realizing that the time had come for her to lend her old father a hand. Recalling that late glimpse of himself in the passage mirror, Mr. Britton envied her the youth to enjoy her adventures ; packing her clothes there, she was like a boy setting out to seek his fortune ; the social world which the admiral knew so well was strange territory for her, and she must explore it, using her eyes, sharpening her wits, picking up technique—in her own phrase—until she succeeded in making a home for the two of them. Carlton House Chambers, with the stage held by a meeting of creditors, hardly represented success.

In the words of Mr. Jorley, it was "a top'-ole address," but it was not a home. Mr. Britton withdrew swiftly from the window as a car nosed gingerly into the sun-lit alley. Not more than two of their friends had ever run them to earth ; and, of these, the one had been admitted to have her compassion aroused, the other had forced an entrance to satisfy her own curiosity. He watched a woman getting out and turned again to the table with apprehensive impatience.

"While reserving complete freedom of action," said Mr. Barratt, "we feel that we should like to hear your proposals."

"Then I suggest that you should let things rip," answered Mr. Britton promptly. "I'll tell you candidly that I don't want to be made bankrupt ; it's damned unpleasant to be posted in all the papers and it's the end of all things for everybody if I have to resign my clubs. I make my income playing cards rather better than most people and playing for higher points than most people. I have to live in a certain style, entertain a bit, turn myself out well. . . . If you'll put yourselves in Mr. Barratt's hands, he and I will go into figures and arrange a scheme, though I warn you to be patient. I don't mean that you're to cut me off supplies : I need my cigars and wine and clothes as much as ever. And I have a wife and daughter," he added with a sudden rush of memory to the head.

"Can you give us an indication. . . ?" began the

representative of Troubridge and Moffatt, recollecting anxiously the instructions of his principals "not to come back here till you've skinned the old ruffian".

"As a beginning, you might look forward to . . . half-a-crown in the pound, six months hence. For what it's worth, I've been through this sort of thing before : I've always paid twenty shillings and I've never pleaded the statute of limitations. That's all I have to say, gentlemen."

With an air of dignified dismissal, Mr. Britton stood up, intact of skin, and waited for the others to rise. One by one, they collected their papers and withdrew in a whispering circle round Mr. Barratt.

"We'll talk this over, and you'll hear from us again," said a voice from the threshold.

Mr. Britton nodded, closed the door and, after a glance to satisfy himself that the car was still outside, sat down at the table and buried his face in his hands.

The door opened softly ; a moment's silence followed ; and it was softly closed.

"Is anything the matter ? "

"Eileen ! " He spun round as though her fingers scorched him, then let his head fall again into his hands. " Oh, I *told* you I shouldn't be fit to see you."

"You frightened me ! Tell me what's troubling you."

Arthur Britton shook his head and, with an impatient lurch, escaped from the caressing hand. Staring at the window, he saw a stout reflection advancing upon him in waves ; in a face hitherto without form, eyes and lips defined themselves in exaggerated black and red ; a sickly-sweet breath of scent enveloped him.

"Arthur, you *must* tell me ! " she begged.

"There's nothing to tell, except that I'm finished. Did you see those men going out ? "

"What did they want ? "

"Creditors only want one thing."

The scent came nearer ; and an arm slipped through his.

"Perhaps I can help you."

"Thanks, Eileen, but I don't take money from women."

"It's my own. . . . I would . . . lend it you."

Arthur Britton tried to remember the total of his liabilities : something under ten thousand, but a gentleman was not expected to concern himself with odd shillings and pence.

"Lend me . . . fifteen thousand pounds ? And how do you think I could pay it back ? "

"I don't *want* you to pay it back!"

He turned a wistful smile upon the blue-white, sensual face pressing against his arm: Mrs. Fison had deteriorated sadly, and, in his prime, he would have discarded her long ago. Now he could not be sure of replacing her. On her side, she could hardly expect to interest another man; and it was prudent to remain patient with her at least until her husband executed his often repeated threat of divorce proceedings.

"You're such a . . . *child*, Eileen! Little girl, don't you *know* that I can't take money from you? We've been . . . criminally careless already; that didn't matter . . . so long as we could snap our fingers at the world. But if any one *whispered* that I was exploiting a rich woman's love . . ."

"And what is your love worth if you won't let me help you? Who would know? . . . Let me, Arthur! *Please!*"

His averted head shook once in uncompromising refusal:

"No, my dear. If I thought for a moment that I should be clear afterwards. . . . It's fifteen thousand for the privilege of being solvent; and, after that, I should slide back into the old morass. I want *twenty* thousand if I'm to make a fresh start; and I'm not worth twenty thousand *pence*. It's no good trying to boost me up, Eileen, I must get away to some place where I can begin again. . . . I felt that before ever I saw these fellows; that's why I told you not to come to-day."

The hand that was resting on his arm tightened in a terrified grip; the other seized his shoulder and turned him until they stood face to face:

"You were going away, Arthur, without telling me? I won't *let* you go."

"I can't stand the disgrace of being made bankrupt."

"But you needn't be! You shan't be! If it's twenty thousand . . . I'll manage somehow."

"I won't take it."

"If you throw the cheque in the fire afterwards . . ." she panted, as he struggled to escape her. "I'm going now, because you're worried and I'm in the way. But you're not to worry, Arthur; I forbid you. By to-morrow . . . everything will be all right."

There was no answer from the now tragic figure at the window, no following footstep as Mrs. Fison walked downstairs and dived furtively into her car. The admiral, standing back a pace to hide himself behind the curtain, watched her chauffeur turning into the mews to make way for a second car; looking at his watch, he raised his eyebrows in surprise at finding how quickly

the two interviews had passed. On the side-board were ranged seven tumblers and an untouched decanter of whisky, "*asking for it*", as he whispered gaily. The admiral poured himself two generous measures and, draining them, placed the empty glasses where Barratt and Simonides had sat. In the next room he could still hear, from time to time, a liquid whistle as Gloria bustled about her packing; and, with a quick glance down at the second car, he hurried into her bedroom.

"Your friend Dot St. John's coming to see you," he called out.

In a mood of less complacency he might have added that Mrs. St. John was the only woman whose inquisitiveness carried her unscathed into the places where she was least welcome; but her help was needed in launching Gloria.

"Damn Dot St. John," his daughter returned without heat, as she stripped the tissue-paper from a spangled dress and held it critically to the light. "*I can't last a week on these rags. . . . How did your meeting go off, father?*"

"Oh, very fairly. We didn't decide anything definite, but in time . . ."

"It's always '*in time*'! Dear father, will you *please* look at these things? I *ask* you!"

"If you want money to go on with, I can let you have some to-morrow or the next day. I'm expecting a fairly big cheque."

Gloria peeped at two open drawers of handkerchiefs and stockings. One serious handicap to her staying in other people's houses had always been that strange maids assumed in her a false standard of wealth and mechanically whisked away clothes that might have been worn economically for one or two days more than she was allowed.

"I *always* want money; you know that. Poor old father! We do work hard for our living, don't we? Did you see Mrs. Fison? I should have known she'd been here, even if I hadn't seen her, . . . from the reek. If you've any influence over her, I wish you'd tell her to use less scent. . . . Go through the other door if you don't want Dot to see you, father; she's coming upstairs now. . . . Lord, what a life! Just one damned thing after another."

As the admiral escaped to his room, Gloria pulled off her pinafore and unrolled her sleeves. A flame-coloured silk handkerchief, knotted piratically round her black hair, was too becoming to disturb; but she dabbed powder on cheeks that were flushed with bending over open trunks.

"Come in here, Dot, if you don't mind a muddle," she called out at the creak of footsteps on the stairs.

A diminutive figure in Russian boots and white military cloak paused for a moment on the threshold and then darted in with outstretched arms :

"Darling ! I won't keep you a moment if you're busy ! I just looked in to say I had a great new scheme to discuss with you."

"You're the most untiring human being I've ever met," said Gloria, half in admiration and half in irritable envy.

Two expensively dressed women within ten minutes of one another were hard to bear in the face of so much draggled, year-old finery.

"Must keep up with the times ! It's about you to-day, darling." After a pecking kiss on either cheek Mrs. St. John sprang on to the bed and sat there swinging her legs, turning over clothes with one hand, feeling for a cigarette-case with the other and taking in everything with flashing sweeps of her observant grey eyes. Forty-eight years of restlessness had reduced her tiny frame to skin and bones, but her energy burned the brighter for her merciless training ; and, as Gloria knew to her cost, she was capable, either in London or at Stratton Park, of exhausting men and women half her age at golf, tennis, bridge, dancing and poker. Four hours' rest, at any time and in any position, was all that she required ; her appetite was hardly greater than a small bird's ; she drank nothing but water and was reported by Colonel St. John to smoke in her sleep. "Can you come to Stratton for the 15th ?"

"If I'm back from Gloucestershire by then. But I hope it won't be anything very strenuous. The summer's only just beginning ; and when I try to run level with you . . ."

"You're from the south, I'm from the north," answered Mrs. St. John with a fleeting glance at a twenty-year-old photograph of Gloria's mother in her *Carmen* dress.

At the same age, they had the same small hands and high-arched feet, the same small waists and shining black hair ; they had also the same full busts, with the menace of later stoutness, and the same indolent, sloe-black eyes ; with her English blood, however, Gloria had inherited greater height and slenderness.

"I believe I was born lazy," she murmured. "What's the scheme, Dot ?"

"My sister-in-law Fay is starting a hat-shop in Hanover Street and she wants me to find some one to help her." Mrs. St. John paused to observe whether the girl would receive this new proposal with greater favour than she had shewn to suggestions for becoming private secretary to a member of parliament or

accepting "crowd-work" with a film-company. Energetically unproductive herself, Mrs. St. John derived vicarious satisfaction from urging others to work; and, ever since uncontrollable inquisitiveness had set her to stalk Arthur Britton to his lair, she felt twinges of responsibility for a motherless girl whose life had been divided between a convent, the Stratton Park auxiliary hospital, "that pig-sty in London"—as she called it—and the country-houses of the pleasure-loving. "Whether it's a success or not, *you'll* be well-paid," she continued. "Maurice and I put up the capital; Fay does the buying in Paris; and all we need is some one in London who will attract people."

For answer Gloria threw her arms round her wizened, eager little friend and kissed her impulsively. Regular work meant good-bye to long luncheons, late dances and leisured week-ends, but it was impolitic to alienate Mrs. St. John's sympathy. Gloria knew, moreover, that there would be a fall in her social value, however much her friends might reassure her. If the admiral could keep his head above water for another three months, she could establish herself. That had been proved in the first year after the war, when, in London and Paris, her gaiety and good looks caused her to be caught up by an ever-increasing circle of friends.

"You *are* a darling to bother about me!" she temporized.

"This is such an unsatisfactory life for a babe of twenty-two," answered Mrs. St. John with a look of unconcealed distaste for this corner of the admiral's dingy hiding-place."

"I'm not here *much*, thank goodness."

"No, but . . . you can't *always* racket about, living in your trunks." In an unguarded moment, before Gloria learned the value of keeping her own counsel, she had confided her apprehension at living regularly beyond her irregular income. Now, her buoyant optimism schooled her to indifference: though she never knew where to look for her next month's food and clothes, she never in fact went short. "If anything happens to the admiral. . . . He's *not* a good life." . . .

"I suppose I shall marry some day. But, you know, I'm afraid father would say it was . . . undignified for me to work in a shop."

Mrs. St. John repressed a caustic comment on the admiral's conception of dignity and decided that nothing could be done for Gloria until she had discovered for herself the futility of exhausting her youth to make a success of other people's parties.

"Where are you off to now?" she asked.

"Glamorganshire, first of all, to stay with the Dixons ; then to Gloucestershire . . ."

"To stay with the Kendailles," Mrs. St. John put in. "Freddie will be at Stratton on the 15th. I think he's in love with you, Gloria."

"He never loses an opportunity of telling me so. . . . As a matter of fact I'm not going to Melby, though Mrs. Kendaille gave me a standing invitation ; I don't *think* I shall have time."

"You're very mysterious about where you *are* going, my dear."

"To the Cartwrights' ; didn't I tell you ? " asked Gloria innocently. "I fancy their place is next to Melby, though I've never seen it. You remember Norman Cartwright in hospital ? "

"'Pink Purity' ? I've known him since he was a child. Is he your latest conquest ? "

"I hardly know him !" cried Gloria with unnecessary vehemence. "We became rather friends when I was nursing him, and he's asked me to Newbridge for a week-end. So, as I was going to be in that part of the world with the Dixons . . ."

"I should say he's not nearly so well worth your while as Freddie Kendaille," pursued Mrs. St. John imperturbably. "It's an old title, of course, and Newbridge is very lovely ; but he can't afford to keep it up. So, at least, Mary Cartwright tells me ; but she may only want a bigger share of the spoil for herself. The Kendailles are *rolling*, of course. . . . I *believe* I asked Norman for the 15th, too, but I'm not sure ; does it matter to you if I have them together ? "

"Darling Dot, I hardly *know* Sir Norman," protested Gloria ; "and, if Freddie Kendaille were the last man in creation, I wouldn't marry him . . . unless I were the last woman. That's the only thing that would keep him faithful. . . . You go ahead with your party and don't bother about me."

"But I want to help you, if I can. I'll make sure about Norman ; and, if I haven't invited him already, I'll send him a line to-night. Good-bye, angel."

As soon as she was left in peace, Gloria tried to concentrate her attention once more on the half-empty trunks and piles of flimsy frocks. It was disquieting to calculate how many new things she needed to cut a creditable figure with Lady Dixon's reclaimed financiers and enthroned chorus-girls at Abergeldy Castle ; but the effort and the challenge roused her spirit of adventure. Of her friends at the convent, whither the admiral had sent her in a mood of vicarious economy, not one had kept

afloat : some were governesses or clerks, a few had married soldiers of undisclosed origin ; but all resigned themselves with false fatalism to the idea that success and money were interlocked. Even without her father's teaching, Gloria knew that birth ranked higher than wealth, personality higher than both. The Brittons had nothing to fear from comparison with the St. Johns : if Dot had spent her way into popularity and power, others could go as far or farther by personal charm, by hard work, above all by courage. Older women always maintained that, by earning your own living, you secured independence ; but a girl could remain independent without entering the bondage of a hat-shop.

The importance of money, according to the admiral, was exaggerated : if one man had too little, another had too much ; and things equalized themselves out. It was supremely important, on the other hand, to belong by birth, marriage, or conquest to a world of men and women who had money without working for it. To that world he himself belonged by virtue of a chequered pedigree and a brief, inglorious and almost forgotten association with the Grenadier Guards in the days before the South African War. To that world Gloria was determined to belong. The old rule that a girl must accept nothing from a man but gloves or chocolates had, mercifully, been done to death by the war : granted good looks and high spirits, you repaid hospitality by your presence and rewarded a donor by accepting his gift. Though her Spanish blood, her conventual training and the very ease of her success might dispose her to mock or snarl at the hand that fed her, nothing so comforting to body and consoling to spirit had as yet been put in the place of that social order which every one informed her was decaying.

"It will last my time, which is all that matters," Gloria told herself ; and, if Dot still wanted to know where the ' racketing about ' and ' living in trunks ' were going to end, she could have her answer pat. "Damn Dot St. John," said Gloria for the second time, now with just warmth, for Dot had been unpardonably inquisitive and mischievous about the invitation to Newbridge.

First locking the door and lighting a cigarette, Gloria threw herself into a chair and turned over a pile of old letters.

"My dear Miss Britton," ran the first ;

"It is many months since I said good-bye to you at Mrs. St. John's hospital, and I am writing to remind you of your promise to let me know when you expect to be in this part of England. Since

I was demobilized, I have been slaving to get this place into some sort of order after my father's death ; and, though makeshift hospitality is the best that I can offer, the house is at least habitable. I know from Mrs. St. John that you are always engaged for weeks ahead ; but, if you will tell me your first free day, I will try to arrange a little party for you. So far as I can judge from what I already know of your tastes, you will love Newbridge ; and I shall love shewing it to you.

"When you come, therefore, now rests with you ; but I hope it will be soon, as I am most impatient to see you again.

"Believe me to be,

"Always most sincerely yours,

"Norman Cartwright."

The month-old letter was by now creased and dog's-eared, for Gloria had fallen into the habit of treating it as an antidote to her periodical moods of detachment. Under the prim phrasing she detected at each reading a deeper cordiality, to remind her that, in spite of his frigid manner, Norman had made her the recipient of confidences which he withheld from Mrs. St. John, from the other nurses and from his brother-officers. He was lonely and eager for sympathy. Bereft of his father and neglected by his mother, he needed a new object of devotion.

In their exchange of confidences, since it was impossible to treat the admiral as non-existent, Gloria had turned him to useful account in explaining whatever was amiss in her life ; and, if Norman's inelastic mind recoiled in misgiving at her vagabond career, she could still criticism with an appeal to pathos. Though she seemed to equal his own reserve, she left in his imagination the forlorn picture of a motherless girl, whose dissolute father had omitted to educate her and was now omitting to provide for her. As she splashed her colours on the canvas, Gloria began to see herself transformed by her own portrait. The darker the background, the more bright she shone by contrast ; and, as Norman tasted the pleasure of dreaming aloud to the first confidant that he had known since his father's death, he revealed a growing interest in the personality of a girl who flitted like a wood-nymph through a forest of obscene satyrs.

In his later letters, she was admitted to closer partnership in his enthusiasm for the proud heritage to which he had succeeded :

"I do hope you won't be disappointed in Newbridge after all my praise of it," he wrote with an anxiety which suggested that he attached more weight to her opinion than to that of a chance

visitor who came for three days and never returned. "*It's an obsession with me, or so my mother will tell you. I've persuaded her to come for your week-end, though I know she hates setting foot in the place. After the exhausting life which you seem to be leading, I hope and believe that this place will give you such a sense of repose and security as you have never known. I shall do everything in my power to make you happy.*" . . .

After an uncounted hour of reverie, Gloria put back the letters and hunted in her writing-case for a snap-shot of Norman, taken in the first days of convalescence at Stratton Park. Though the eye-sockets were hollow and the cheeks sunken, the expression—serious and rather severe—was characteristic; a bandage concealed his short, indeterminate fair hair, but the light-grey eyes were frank and steady; straight lips were tightly shut under a wiry, clipped moustache; and the Cartwright nose revealed itself in the glint of high light on the prominent bridge.

"He's not a beauty . . . with that beak," Gloria decided. "But it's a tolerable face . . . and he looks clean. . . . Obstinate, I should think . . . and a bit narrow. He'll expect my best party manners, and I mustn't talk slang. . . . Bad to get across. . . . On the other hand, you'd always know where you were with him: if he said a thing one day, he'd never go back on it the next; if *you* declared *your* terms, and *he* declared *his* . . ."

She was still brooding over the photograph when her father returned from his afternoon bridge at the County Club and came to discuss their movements for the following week.

"We shall meet at the St. Johns'," he concluded, when Gloria had explained her itinerary, "but not before. I shall be kept here on business the rest of the time."

"I suppose that means it isn't convenient for Mrs. Fison to leave London and she won't trust you out of her sight," suggested Gloria, who suddenly discovered that the interruption of her reverie had exasperated her beyond bearing.

"It means what I say: business," returned the admiral. "I don't know why you always go out of your way to attack Eileen Fison. I owe more to her than I can ever hope to repay . . ."

"We can say that of most of the people we've honoured with our friendship. And you hope to owe her still more, I should think, before you've done. I only object because I think there should be an age-limit for vice: she's too old to be carrying on like this; and so are you, if it comes to that. But, if you *must* do it, I only ask you to wait till I'm out of the way. I play

absolutely fair with you, father : I always send you a wire before I come here, I never go to a house if I think I'm likely to cramp your style. You might do the same for me, because it cramps my style horribly if I'm beginning to have a little bit of a success and you suddenly blow in with some one like Mrs. Fison. *Don't* bring her down to Stratton when I'm there ! ”

Self-control or an uneasy conscience kept the admiral from answering until Gloria moved away to dress for dinner.

“ Well, I hope you'll enjoy yourself,” he said at last with patient determination to forgive at all costs. “ You needn't be afraid your poor old father's going to disgrace you. The Dixons, you said ? And then the Kendailles ? ”

“ No, I'm not going to the Kendailles this time.”

“ Um. You might do worse than marry young Kendaile,” mused the admiral, who had experienced the comfort of Melby Court more than once.

“ I could marry young Kendaile at any hour of the day or night if I wanted to. I don't happen to want to.”

“ Well, where *are* you going, if it's not there ? ”

“ I'm staying with some people called Cartwright. I nursed the boy at Stratton.”

“ Young Norman ? I was playing bridge with him at the club this afternoon. He'll never be a player.” Though the admiral had enjoyed the hospitality of Newbridge, he disliked dressing by candle-light and waiting his turn for a bath. “ Bit of a stick, too, I always think ; but the Cartwrights are like that. I could tell you a lot about them.”

“ You shall tell me this evening, father darling, but I *must* begin to dress now.”

On her return to Carlton House Chambers eight hours later, after a dinner-party and a ball, Gloria discovered her father, industrious and sober, in shirt-sleeves at a table strewn with notifications that an account had already been rendered.

“ Only just in time,” he called out in happy amnesty of their earlier difference. “ This is share-out night ! A little bit for a good girl, a little bit for her poor old dad.” . . .

Gloria looked with surprise at the cheque for £500 which he thrust into her hands.

“ What's the matter with it ? ” she enquired suspiciously.

“ Well, *that's* a pretty thing to say ! ” cried the admiral. “ Pay it in, my dear, and see ! ” Triumph overmastered discretion ; and he held out a second cheque, this time for £20,000. “ Hullo ! it's postdated the 30th. . . . Um. . . . You mustn't present that for a week.”

At the bottom of the second cheque Gloria read, in a shapeless scrawl, "*Eileen Fison*".

"God!" she exclaimed in disgust, directed first at her father and then at the woman who allowed her father to exploit the helpless, despairing passion of middle-age. "There are moments when you make me feel sick. Here, you can keep your old cheque. Aren't you *ever* ashamed of yourself, father?" For a moment, as she stood with arms akimbo and heaving bosom, Gloria seemed to take on the pride, the passion, even the violence of her mother, as, in that moment, she had taken on her mother's expression and scolding voice. Then the mixed blood asserted itself; and her father's hatred of noise and emotion was reflected in a shame-faced apology for her outburst. "No, I don't think you know the meaning of the word."

"I certainly don't know what's the matter with you to-day!" cried the admiral. "I don't ask much of you, Gloria, but I *do* ask you to keep a civil tongue in your head. I didn't want to upset you; but, if you think you're entitled to an explanation, I'll tell you that 'business meeting' this afternoon was a meeting of creditors; and it was a very nice question whether they'd make me bankrupt. I've had the worst possible luck for the last year, I've not been able to pay men at the club, I've not been able to meet my bills, I've not been able to give you any money. Eileen came in to-day and saw there was something up; I never asked her for a penny; when she offered it me, I said I wouldn't take it; and, if I can't throw it back in her face, I can at least repay it *with interest* as soon as I'm in funds again. I don't know whether you'd *like* to see me bankrupt, disgraced, turned out of my clubs," . . . he continued in the tone that had succeeded so well with Mrs. Fison.

As it failed to impress his daughter, he lapsed into silence.

"As long as you don't ask *me* to join in . . ." Gloria began, as she took off her cloak and walked to the door.

"You please yourself, my dear. I notice it's always 'I want money for this or that', you're glad enough to live here and send in your bills to me; but the moment I accept a loan from a friend . . ."

Despite her resolve to check all further outbursts, Gloria turned in the door-way, flashing scorn on the unruffled figure at the table:

"'A loan from a friend'! You live on all these young boys at your club, and whenever you've fascinated some horrible old woman . . ."

Not trusting herself to say more, she crumpled her cheque into a ball and tossed it into the fire-place.

"If you don't want it, don't take it," counselled the admiral placidly. "But there's no need to call people names. *You* go to your Dot St. Johns and your Bella Dixons for what you can get out of them; when you win money, you expect to be paid; but, when you lose, they don't expect you to pay them. Young fools like Freddie Kendaille load you up with presents. . . . No, it's my turn now, my dear; you've had your fling at me. Now, we get on very comfortably so long as we don't give ourselves any airs. It's too late for *us* to begin pretending. I've never swindled a man in my life; and, if I come out best when I'm matched with a fool, you bet I come out second-best when I meet some one sharper than I am. As I tell you, I've every intention of paying this money back to Eileen Fison; but, if I bilk her in cold blood, d'you think I haven't been bilked all my days by any woman who was artful enough to get the soft side of *me*?" The force and reasonableness of his own case restored the admiral's customary good-humour; and he rose with a propitiatory smile to retrieve the despoiled cheque. "You're going to be a sensible little girl now, aren't you?"

"I'd rather die than take it!" Gloria cried. "If I sold myself to a man, would you expect to go shares?"

Like most men of loose life, the admiral was always sincerely shocked by laxity of speech or conduct in a young girl. It was a maxim of life to which he paid lip-service that a man should remain sober until sundown and a woman virtuous till marriage.

"My dear, you'd better go to bed and talk to me again when you're in rather a different mood," he suggested magisterially, as he began to fill in a further batch of cheques. "I'm going racing to-morrow, so I shan't see you before you start. Mind you enjoy yourself. Good-night. Sleep well!"

If anything had been required to keep Gloria wakeful, this jaunty valediction would have supplied it. As she undressed and threw garment after garment impatiently on to floor or chair, Gloria could not pretend that she did not benefit by her father's occasional affluence, however won: if she loathed the furtive squalor of Carlton House Chambers, she was yet undeniably glad to have a sanctuary of any kind; and, so long as the bills for her very clothes were paid from his pocket, she could not fairly enquire how the money came there.

"Pleasant to think he may be rooking Norman to pay for my food! Anyway, I won't take any more," she told herself.

At once, in a mind never free from the obsession of money,

there rose the mocking reflection that she could only become independent of her father by becoming dependent on some one else; by selling her vitality to Lady Dixon or her person to a husband, . . . as her father sold his to Mrs. Fison.

"I suppose I *could* peddle hats for Fay St. John . . .," she murmured.

Drawing on a tea-gown, she stalked into the dining-room in time to see her father collecting his papers and heading for the corner of the side-board where stood syphons and a decanter of whisky.

"Hullo! Come to say you've changed your mind like a wise little girl?" he enquired genially.

"But I haven't," Gloria answered icily. "I've just remembered that I didn't tell you about Dot St. John. Her sister-in-law is starting a hat-shop; and they want me to go and help."

Her father filled and half emptied a tumbler before replying.

"Well, I don't envy you the prospect. What did you tell her?" he asked at length.

"I . . . said I'd think about it," improvised Gloria.

"You'll miss the beer and skittles," predicted the admiral.

"At the same time, if you're not happy in your present life. . . . What's the matter, Gloria? Has anything gone wrong with you?"

"No . . . I find everything so sordid here. It's exciting for you to sharpen your wits on other people, but I want a little . . . repose and security for a change." She hesitated and flushed at finding that she had used the language of Norman Cartwright's letter. "I know you do your best for me; but it's a funny sort of life for a girl."

Though he looked intently at the imperious black eyes and gleaming hair of a girl half-English in blood and wholly English in speech and upbringing, the admiral could for a moment see only the long-dead *prima donna* in a Spanish touring company.

"And you're a funny sort of girl. I'm hanged if I can understand you when you're in the domestic mood," he murmured; and, looking beyond her and the shadowy panels of the low-ceilinged room, he saw again a bare-boarded upper chamber in Cordova, with a reeking naphtha flare, an acrid cloud of cigarette-smoke, a whispering cluster of Andalusian dancers and a row of dingy tables set with olives and sour wine. "We're rolling stones, my dear; it don't suit us to stick long in one place, even when we marry. But that, I suppose, you'll have to find out for yourself. . . . Well, I won't stand in your way, though I'm sure you'd be wiser to look round among the young fellows

you meet. . . . If you don't like Freddie Kendaile, what kind of man is Cartwright ? ”

“ I hardly know him. It was *you* who said you could tell me all about them,” Gloria snapped, in exasperation that he had not forbidden her outright to think of serving in a shop.

Her father paused to collect his thoughts ; and a smile spread over his pendulous cheeks.

“ Mary Cartwright was a great flame of mine in old days,” he announced. “ She had all London at her feet ; and, though she couldn't afford to think of marrying me, I fancy she liked me better than the rest. Edgar Cartwright was a pompous ass, but the position glamourised her. We met occasionally, when she broke away from Newbridge. . . . The boy, I should say, is the son of his father : ‘ old English ’, backbone of the country. But Mary was a proper little devil.”

Divining that she was to hear no more, Gloria looked at the clock and left her father to chuckle obscenely over his reminiscences. The sky was already brightening to dawn ; and, though she addressed an envelope to Mrs. St. John, the hour gave her an excuse for postponing her decision. When she was called, the admiral had already left the house ; and Gloria forgot her other problems in dismay at discovering that she had not enough money for her ticket to the country. Though such a minor crisis had lost the excitement of novelty, this reminder of her dependence was a galling commentary on her late lofty speeches and brave attitudes ; already overdrawn at the bank, she knew that she could get no accommodation there on the strength of a post-dated cheque even for £500, and, though the cheque still lay crumpled and dusty under the clock on the dining-room mantelpiece, she would have invented an excuse to stay in London rather than use it.

Rather than use it she would throw herself on the mercy of a landlord whose habitual disrespect and conspiratorial cunning already roused her to impotent fury.

“ Ten quid ? ” repeated Mr. Jorley with spirituous affability. “ ‘ Appy to oblige you, miss. ”

“ I meant to ask my father,” Gloria explained nervously, “ but I quite forgot.”

“ That's all right, miss. Not the first time, and I dessay it won't be the last, though I thought the admiral was flush. ‘ Jorley,’ 'e says to me last night, ‘ ‘ow much do I owe you ? ’ 'e says. ‘ A matter o' two-eight-seven fourteen six, admiral,’ I says. ‘ Well, damme, there's three 'undred,’ 'e says ; ‘ only don't you go presenting that there cheque till the first of the

month. *In the meantime,* 'e says, 'I want fifty to go on with.' 'Youlaloi,' I says," Mr. Jorley continued with a strange, toothless whoop that combined disastrously a yodel and a call to hounds. "And I let 'im 'ave it, miss. 'I know you, admiral,' I says. And I do, miss. 'E's a bit slow at times, but the money's *there*. And it's what I always say . . ."

"I wish you wouldn't call Mr. Britton 'the admiral'," interrupted Gloria when impatience prevailed over the incongruity of accepting an undignified favour and of administering a dignified rebuke simultaneously.

"Youlaloi! Every one calls 'im 'the admiral'," rejoined Mr. Jorley. "They always 'ave. Why, when 'e first came 'ere, I thought 'e reely 'ad bin at sea. . . . But I'm keeping you, miss. I'll see about that there taxi."

As she turned from the narrow alley into Bury Street, Gloria looked back for a last view of Carlton House Chambers. Mr. Jorley, in his unvarying baize apron and list slippers, stood sunning himself by the window of the newsvendor's shop, surveying a line of gaudy periodicals through an unfamiliar pair of steel-rimmed spectacles and waiting for some one within the barred and shuttered public-house to answer his private signal. A famished cat reconnoitred the entrance to the grocery store until put to flight by a fat woman with a broom. A vagrant stood bent over an open rubbish-box, picking out fragments of meat and crusts of bread to stow in a bursting side-pocket before the municipal dust-carts cut short his chance.

"And I have to live here!" Gloria whispered. "I wonder what Bella Dixon would think if she knew. I wonder what Dot St. John *does* think. . . . She blames it on to father, I suppose, but that doesn't help *me*. I can't *stand* it!"

The taxi turned through St. James' Street into Piccadilly. Not until she was far enough from Carlton House Chambers to feel the air clean did Gloria open her morning's letters.

The first was from Norman Cartwright:

"If you are going to Lady Dixon's, you will of course come on here direct. There's a four-ten which gets you in to Gloucester in comfortable time for dinner. I am praying for fine weather, as the place is very lovely at present, and I want you to see it at its best. I cannot tell you how much I am looking forward to your visit, though I feel more than a little nervous: this is the first party that I have attempted, and I shall never forgive myself if anything goes wrong. Perhaps it will also be the last. My solicitors are

trying to convince me that I cannot afford to live here ; and I am engaged in refusing to be convinced." . . .

By comparison with this, her other letters seemed unimportant. Until she had seen Newbridge, Gloria felt she must not be expected to care greatly whether Norman could afford to live there or not ; she cared very greatly that, in a note designed to arrange trains with her, he should be constrained to take her into his confidence ; the formality and caution of his address had already relaxed as far as "*My Dear Miss Gloria.*"

"I wonder what he'd think if he knew about father and the sort of life I lead," she mused. "I'm afraid that would send some cold shivers down the old English backbone. Or it might impress him enormously. One never knows. . . . I wish I could manage by hook or by crook to come by a maid. Just for travelling. It's the one thing I lack."

In Berkeley Square and Mount Street, it seemed the hour for prosperous, infirm old gentlemen to lay aside their spectacles and toddle into the sunshine. A few stared impudently at the fleeting figure in lavender frock and hat, but Gloria stared back at them unabashed : if they were spared, they might live to see her, too, getting into one of these shining cars. So the old mummies must have looked from the windows of the Tuileries when Lieutenant Buonaparte was pacing the streets of Paris. . . .

From Grosvenor Square to Paddington she passed her personal appearance in review : her trunk was new enough to satisfy the most critical servants, old enough to dispel any suspicion that it had been bought for this occasion ; her green-leather dressing-case was calculated to establish her no less surely in the respect of her fellow-travellers.

"And I must say," she reflected, with Britton buoyancy, "I make a good show with my clothes, however old they may be. With a maid, people would price me at £3000 a year. And you have a much better time if you *look expensive.*" . . .

As the taxi rattled down the slope into the station, Gloria remembered guiltily that she was paying her fare with borrowed money and that the borrowing would be made good with money which she had refused to finger. From a passing milk-cart came a sound suspiciously like 'Youlaloi !' . . .

CHAPTER ONE

'THE APPROPRIATE COUNTRY'

GERALD : But it is very difficult to get into society, isn't it ?
LORD ILLINGWORTH : To get into the best society, nowadays, one has either to feed people, amuse people, or shock people—that is all !
GERALD : I suppose society is wonderfully delightful !
LORD ILLINGWORTH : To be in it is merely a bore. But to be out of it simply a tragedy. . . .
—OSCAR WILDE : *A Woman of No Importance.*

I

"I *have* a carriage for you, miss. Number one platform. I'll see to your luggage, miss."

Gloria had been so much occupied with her own dreams of empire that for a moment she found nothing unusual in having the door of her taxi opened by a smiling man-servant who at once took paternal charge of herself and of her belongings. The taxi should have been a private car, with the tiniest coronet on side and back ; Freddie Kendaile's valet should have been her own liveried footman ; but the picture was right in spirit.

"How did Mr. Freddie know I should be here ?" she asked.

"I can't say, I'm sure, miss. He told me to be on the lookout for you. You'd like your dressing-case in the carriage with you ?"

Gloria nodded and walked on to the platform, knowing well that the first condition of employment at Melby was that every servant should be as courteously inscrutable as the tall man who now hurried forward from the door of a reserved compartment and welcomed her with a smile that puckered the wrinkles round his gleaming, brown eyes.

After three years, she knew no more of Freddie Kendaile than when he began a suit that was insincere even to his own

hearing. At forty, he behaved like a boy and yet instilled no boyishness into his calculated playing. At this moment, as he flourished a vast bouquet of carnations at her, he was enough the young lover from the musical-comedy stage to disgust his restrained brother-officers in the Rifle Brigade, if any had been present; but he paid as little attention to the opinion of the regiment as to his own musical-comedy gestures. The brown hat, so harmonious with the suit and hair, argued a dandy; but Gloria had been present when Freddie inadvertently overheard himself described as "extraordinarily good-looking, of course, but the world's worst bounder". And he had wondered indifferently why just those qualities had been chosen. To Dot St. John, he was "a man who always put all his cards on the table and always cheated out of dummy." In her rare moments of prudence, Gloria recognized an opponent who was more than a match for her; but, when she recalled her three-years' resistance to his insidious attacks, she went forward recklessly to discover his secret.

"Hullo, Freddie! You look as if you were going to a wedding," she observed.

"Would that I were! And that you were coming with me! 'Miss Gloria Britton, who is being married to Captain Frederick Kendaile to-day at St. Margaret's, Westminster. Inset, Captain Frederick Kendaile, who is marrying Miss Gloria Britton to-day at St. Margaret's, Westminster.' What a striking couple we should make! 'Inset, Mrs. Frederick Kendaile striking Captain Frederick Kendaile.' Ah me! . . . Instead of which I'm only going to Melby, like a dutiful son. I want to know if I may travel with you as far as Gloucester?"

"I shall be delighted." Gloria accepted the flowers and allowed herself to be installed in the corner of a carriage already half-filled by cushions and luncheon-baskets. Better than most men, Freddie understood the art of small comforts; and, if he was more studiously selfish than any man of her acquaintance, Gloria found this no inconvenience so long as it amused him to attend her as a worshipper.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Quite, thanks. How did you know I was coming by this train?"

"It's the only train in the day that gets you to Bella Dixon's in time for dinner. . . . I'm sure you hate luncheon-cars as much as I do, so I told my people to make up something that you could eat and I thought we might have it in here. The basket in the rack contains tea, and I'll leave that with you in case you want anything after Gloucester."

“It’s awfully good of you. . . . But, Freddie, how did you know I was going to Bella’s at all?”

“Some one must have told me,” he answered carelessly, as he arranged the cushion at her back and took the seat opposite her. “I was wondering whether you could manage a few days at Melby on your way back. If you’re going to Dot St. John’s on the 15th . . .”

“So some one’s told you that, too,” Gloria murmured.

“ . . . and to Newbridge on Friday . . .”

“That too. Your secret service is very efficient, Freddie, but I sometimes wish you wouldn’t spy on me quite so much.”

Feeling her cheeks warming with annoyance, Gloria turned away and pulled up the window between them. Though Freddie made a fool of himself about her, he was naturally clever; his tastes, however, ran by preference along lines of intrigue, and one of many enemies complained that he travelled by two sides of a triangle only when he could not steal round three sides of a square.

“If I waited for you to tell me, I should never know what you were doing,” Freddie pointed out. “Now, don’t you think you can manage four or five days with us when you leave the Cartwrights’? You’ll find that a week-end at Newbridge is quite as much as you’ll want.”

“That I shan’t know till I get there,” answered Gloria, without choosing to notice her companion’s tone of disparagement. “I hope you heard what I said: I don’t like being spied on.”

“I take a great interest in everything that concerns you,” he ventured.

“Evidently. All the same, if you value my friendship as much as you pretend . . .”

“I value *you*. I’ve never pretended to value your friendship. There can be no *friendship* between a girl of your age and a man of mine. I want more than that.”

Curiosity prevailed over caution and drew Gloria’s gaze from the drab villas and factories of outer London.

“Don’t I know that?” she sighed. “Since the first time I saw you at Dot St. John’s, can you remember a single meeting when we haven’t had our usual dialogue? ‘Gloria darling, will you marry me?’ ‘No, Freddie dear, I won’t.’ And I *won’t*, Freddie. I wish I could make you see that.”

“I’m in no hurry,” he answered with the complacency that always shook Gloria’s faith in her own domination. “I only feel it’s a pity to waste time. We could have such fun. And in the long run . . .”

"You're too sure of yourself, my dear ; you've had too easy a time with other women. In the long run perhaps you'll realize that I'm different from the rest."

"If I didn't realize that now, I shouldn't want to marry you. I've never wanted to *marry* any one before."

"And in six months' time you'd be saying to the next woman 'I never wanted to *marry* Gloria, but there was no other way of getting hold of her'."

"Then it *is* only a ridiculous hypothetical jealousy," murmured Freddie, as he unpacked a box of chocolates and placed it on the seat by her side. "When we're married . . ."

"Freddie, that's forbidden !"

As she explored the chocolates, keeping the creams for herself and throwing him the almonds, Gloria congratulated herself on having headed the conversation off Newbridge. Until she had refreshed her memory of Norman, she could not afford to make him a spur to Freddie's passion for intrigue ; and, though her marriage to one man would free her other suitors from their allegiance, she saw no purpose in disbanding them prematurely. Freddie was useful in helping her to forget the squalor of Carlton House Chambers ; and, so long as she gave him no encouragement, she could not be criticized for accepting his presents. The flowers and chocolates, the dressing-case on which she depended to impress her fellow-travellers, the platinum wrist-watch which he had bought because it looked so well in the shop and was sure to become her were but a small part of all that he would have liked to give her. She could be rich beyond the dreams of avarice if she could overcome her distrust of him or shut her eyes to the position which his wife would occupy when his first infatuation had worn off.

Freddie was watching her attentively ; and, though he smiled when their eyes met, the silent scrutiny gave Gloria an uncomfortable suspicion that he was reading her thoughts.

"May I make a personal criticism ?" he asked.

"You may do anything you like so long as you don't propose again. I don't think you ought to do that till we're the other side of Reading. . . . I hate being proposed to in the suburbs."

"I wanted to tell you that you're not looking well," he answered with disconcertingly gentle gravity. "I know you're worried and I know the reason." . . .

At the caress in his voice and look, Gloria found herself flushing uncomfortably :

"I'd rather not talk about that, Freddie, please."

"I shouldn't dare . . . if other people weren't talking about

it already. I'm told that Archie Fison is determined to divorce Eileen at all costs. Whoever's picked on, there'll be a great washing of dirty linen. . . . I've been thinking that, if I hired a yacht, you could make up your own party for a six months' cruise. . . . If you like, I'll take a house for you in . . . Italy; you can tell people you're studying art." . . .

The eager voice grew slow and died away at Gloria's quick head-shake:

"It's sweet of you, Freddie, but there *are* just one or two things I *can't* do. Having a house given me is one."

"Then come to Melby and stay with my mother. I'll keep out of the way, if you like."

"I'll think it over. Perhaps, after all, there won't *be* a scandal." . . .

2

After expecting a discussion of the admiral's threatened bankruptcy, Gloria needed time to consider how his appearance in the Divorce Court would affect her own position. On the advent of Mrs. Fison, as of her predecessors, she had sometimes idly wondered whether her step-mother would seize the opportunity of breaking free from the man who had squandered her money and then deserted her; that Mrs. Fison's invertebrate husband would check the long career of piracy had apparently occurred to no one. Gloria wondered what her rather strait-laced friend Norman Cartwright would think of it. Then she wondered if Freddie, who knew her movements so accurately, was inventing the scandal as an excuse for separating them.

"How far are you from the Cartwrights?" she asked suddenly, in the hope of testing whether she, too, was a thought-reader.

"They're our nearest neighbours," Freddie answered without embarrassment. "If you walk across the links and up the hill to the south, you look down on Newbridge. Poplar Ridge is the boundary."

"Why have you never taken me there?"

"Until quite recently I never imagined you knew them."

"But it's one of the show-places of the county, isn't it?"

"Yes. But it was out of commission for most of the war; and, before that, Sir Edgar and my father had rather a row. The Cartwrights thought it was sacrilege for us to come to Melby at all, still more to pull down the old house; and they looked down on us because we were bankers. The gov'nor,

who in those days never refused a fight, looked down on the Cartwrights—and everybody else, for the matter of that—as so many limpets who'd been left behind by the flood and would benefit by being stirred up a bit ; *they* said we were pushful, *we* said they were standoffish. I get on quite well with Norman."

" Shall I see you while I'm there ? " asked Gloria.

" Yes, he's invited me to come over with my party on the first night. And I believe you're coming to lunch the next day."

" Who else is going to be there ? "

" Oh, all the leading lights of the county, you may be sure. I haven't heard details."

" How did you hear about me ? " Gloria asked again.

Freddie smiled to himself as his servant entered from the corridor and began to unpack the luncheon-baskets.

" You'd like a glass of sherry to begin with, wouldn't you ? " he asked, unlocking a mahogany box of case-bottles. " And then, as we're eating shell-fish, I think we ought to drink white wine ; there's some of your favourite Sauterne. How did I hear that you were going to Newbridge next week-end ? I suppose some one must have told me." . . .

The luncheon, devised and served with Freddie's unflinching care for detail, strengthened Gloria's feeling that every mile she hastened away from Carlton House Chambers brought her a mile nearer to her own country and her own people. Dot St. John, in a moment of malice, might whisper that " when darling Gloria can't get luxury, she puts up uncomplainingly with every kind of comfort ", but people who were not trying to be spiteful recognized that big houses and deft servants went naturally with birth and breeding ; and, though Gloria never investigated whether her Spanish mother caused a technical break in the Britton line of birth, she had no misgivings about the Britton breeding. Her father had held a commission in Her Majesty's Foot Guards ; and, though the Yorkshire estates had passed in the female line into another name, no member of the family had ever descended to commerce. To hear Freddie, therefore, contentedly calling himself a banker struck as false a note as when he sneered at " the leading lights of the county ". She was thankful that he spared her the tiresome pleasantry of referring to the Kendales as " the backbone of the middle classes ".

Such a phrase, on the lips of a man who had been at Eton and Magdalen and had served in the Rifle Brigade, convinced Gloria that Freddie was hopeless. It was old John Kendale, now conveniently near the grave, who had set the grip of the Wessex and Mercia bank on the south-west and midland counties : the

sons only amused themselves by attending board-meetings when they had nothing better to do ; and, if they liked, they could now make a position for themselves equal to that of the Jerseys, the Lincolnshires and the Durhams. Freddie, however, had no ambition to be a “ leading light ” in any sphere : he trifled with his business, kept politics at arm’s length and lived for his own selfish enjoyment. By the age of forty he boasted that he knew precisely what he wanted : leisure to read and play the piano, leisure to dance attendance—with astonishing devotion—on his old parents ; leisure to see a great many people for a short time and, when his humour was moved, to interfere arbitrarily with their fate. Though a hedonist, his appetites were moderate ; and his strongest positive characteristic was a bland refusal to do anything that he did not want. To his thinking, it was absurd to reiterate that certain things were not, or were, done, if in fact he did, or did not, do them.

This middle-class self-satisfaction was a sufficient obstacle in itself to any thought of him as a husband. The Brittons neither sneered nor gaped ; at Newbridge, Gloria could expect, quite simply, to meet people of her own position ; and, if she gave a thought beforehand to her speech and manner, it was because her wandering life led her into places where one was liable to pick up strange phrases and ideas. Dot St. John always underlined the importance of “ good country-house technique ” ; and the vulgarity of Lady Dixon’s parties and the Bohemianism of Freddie Kendaille’s were a lesson in what to avoid. If only some one had licked him into shape ! He was so good-looking ! He had such qualities ! . . .

“ You really *are* the most wonderful person to travel with ! ” Gloria exclaimed, as he broke in upon her reverie by offering her a cigarette of the brand which she had once praised three years earlier.

“ I’m really a wonderful person to live with,” he answered complacently, as a tray of coffee and liqueurs appeared from the corridor. “ And there, if I may say so, you make such a terrible mistake in wasting all this time. Until we’re married, there’s so little I can do for you.”

“ Be careful, Freddie ! ”

Gloria leaned forward for her cigarette to be lighted and then looked eagerly away at the England of the great houses. Though she refused to take Melby Court at the price of marrying a man whose tortuous mind disquieted her as much as his unstable affections, she would find—in her appropriate country and among her own people—a setting not less worthy than the one which

she was rejecting with so pleasant a sense of power. Any one of the red or grey mansions that she saw slumbering distantly in a protecting belt of woodland belonged to her of right no less than Abergeldy belonged to Bella Dixon, whose unaided beauty had drawn her from the revue stage. Freddie at least rated her at her proper value with his unstudied suggestions of a house here or a yacht there whenever she wished to escape the embarrassment of living with her father.

"At Gloucester I shall entrust you to the care of my young brothers," he continued. "They're going to Abergeldy; and though I can't hope they'll take my place . . ."

"I hope they won't try!" interrupted Gloria. "The first time I came to Melby, you all three proposed to me."

"I was quite serious. I expect the boys only wanted to make you feel at home. They're always proposing to people."

"And aren't you?"

"I never proposed to any one in my life till I met you. There's a double danger about proposing: you may be refused, but you may also be accepted. You should save your jealousy, Gloria, till I give you cause for it. . . . I wonder what you *would* do if I were unfaithful to you?"

Though his tone was bantering, Gloria's face and manner suddenly seemed to lose all trace of English blood: her lips paled and contracted; her black eyes warmed; and her features grew rigid.

Freddie smiled. This show of mettle was no doubt designed to intimidate him; but it only quickened his desire to break her in.

"I should just . . . walk out of the house," she answered.

"But it's always so humiliating when you have to come back," he laughed.

The mockery in his eyes and the hint of contempt in the lines from nose to mouth warned Gloria that she would be unwise to lose her temper:

"I shouldn't come back."

"Then you're playing into the other woman's hands."

With impatience that could no longer be concealed, Gloria threw away her cigarette and closed her eyes. When Freddie talked of women with this irritating pose of omniscience and omnipotence, her own personality seemed to beat ineffectually against him.

"If you're going to talk such nonsense, *I'm* going to sleep," she announced.

At Gloucester, when he faded from sight like a dream of something curly, twinkling, brown and mocking, she roused to give an apprehensive welcome to his younger brothers. A flavour of the knockabout comedian clung to Percy and Dick Kendale, who were endowed with Freddie's vitality and good looks without his serenity of manner or subtlety of mind. Both men had suffered, since childhood, from too much money and, since the end of the war, from too little work ; they belonged now, in Gloria's social classification, to a youthful politico-financial group of men who gambled on the mark exchange in the morning, played polo in the afternoon and danced at the Turf and Stage Club in the evening. If they had homes of their own, they were never caught in a domestic attitude ; and, though many lived blameless lives, all enjoyed the temperamental freedom of a meeting-place where moral judgements were forbidden. When Gloria from time to time penetrated to this resplendent underworld, she found the same men and women shuffling the same ephemeral unions ; but for chance hints of new business combinations, she would have fancied that they had been dining and dancing at the Turf and Stage since last she encountered them there ; and every one clung religiously to the convention that every one else had been hilariously drunk the night before.

They were the only kind of people, apparently, that Lady Dixon could entice to Abergeldy Castle.

"Surely the moment of all moments for a little penny nap?" Dick proposed, as he took the corner seat opposite Gloria.

"Or, if you'd care to try your luck at the three-card trick?" suggested Percy. "Spot the lady! Spot the lady! Are you watching carefully, Gloria? That one? *No*, I think not! Watch again. . . . I met a cove in the train goin' to Newmarket last week—I'm free to admit he was three-parts blind—. . . Spot the lady! Spot the lady!"

Determined not to exhaust herself before it was necessary, Gloria lay back and encouraged her companions to describe the Newmarket meeting. Though she knew too little of racing even to reconcile the admiral's infallible tips with his unfailing reverses, she was at least spared the risk of losing twenty pounds at a game that bored her ; and, in the business of mastering English country life, she would have some day to acquire the language and technique of the turf. Did not the Cartwrights give a house-party each year for Leetham Races? Half her

visits were undertaken for the sake of experience ; though, looking through half-closed lids at the animated, handsome faces before her, she decided that Bella Dixon was teaching her little more than what people to avoid in the perfect scheme of social success.

"Not bad for the Hippodrome," murmured Percy, as they swept along the drive to Abergeldy and saw the house standing out on the sky-line ; " though I don't know that I should care about having Roper thrown in."

"I'm told he's gone dry," Dick volunteered.

"Lord ! He was only tolerable when he was paralytic," Percy answered in disgust.

"To his wife ?" asked Gloria, though she felt strongly that women who married outside their class had only themselves to blame.

This marriage, like many another of the last ten years, had been contrived by Dot St. John, who hated to see good money going begging. To her critics she explained that, though Sir Roper was objectionable when drunk, he was too conceited, when sober, to dream of allying himself with an unknown actress. Some congratulated Bella on her achievement, others sneered at her for marrying a man whom she did not pretend to love. With a disturbing memory of Carlton House Chambers, Gloria contented herself with wondering whether these affluent Kendale boys, or Norman Cartwright, or even Roper Dixon could realize the blank helplessness of girls who lived by their looks and dared not become old, . . . of girls, for that matter, who lived without five shillings in reserve and had to spend or lose with the artificial good-humour that masked despair.

"If she keeps him sober," Percy argued, "he'll see all the floaters she makes. The last time I was here, Roper was . . . indisposed, luckily for him. Bella ran a hunt-breakfast single-handed and covered herself with glory. When the Master turned up, she said 'Oh, Whip, if you'll take the dogs round to the stables, they can have something to eat too.'"

Further comment on the mistress of Abergeldy was baulked by the appearance of the mistress herself, standing with a fair, bald and vacant-faced young husband on the terrace at the end of the drive. Whatever other lessons the Abergeldy visit might hold, Gloria was determined that in her own career there should be no initial blunders. Then she turned to study what progress her friend had made in four months. The hesitating, ineffectual manner of Sir Roper contrasted strongly with the assurance of a wife to whom he was still obviously enslaved ; as she entered the castle, Gloria found that it had been set in order with a ruthless

efficiency that was no less conspicuous than the absence of all artistic taste. And, as she headed for her room, she realized that the guests were to be ordered and arranged as autocratically as the furniture.

“Get your things off, dearie, and then we can have a nice game of cards before dinner,” Lady Dixon announced.

“If you’ll wait till I’ve written just *two* letters . . .,” Gloria began.

“You can write your old letters later,” interrupted her hostess, in the commanding tone which she had used a year ago to her husband and six months later to her servants. “You’ll have to work like a black. The boys are all in filthy tempers already, and the women are just feeling round for a quarrel. Roper and I have washed our hands of them and left them to their sulks.”

Gloria walked upstairs with outward resignation and an inwardly consoling sense that, though Bella might have become domineering, she was still common. The discovery cleansed her mind of resentment that she should be made responsible for saving the party; and her task was sweetened by the knowledge that she had been set to do what Bella could not achieve herself.

With every new effort, however, Gloria felt that, in her appropriate country and among her own people, she was being denied her rightful place. Two nights and a day were to pass before she found leisure to write; and, in that time, as she recapitulated with a pent rage for revenge, she had sung, danced, lost forty-seven pounds at *chemin-de-fer*, won thirty-nine at poker, submitted to the laboured gallantries of an elderly general and punished him by dressing up as a housemaid and threatening to tell Lady Dixon of his attempt to kiss her.

“And now I want a rest,” she sighed to Percy Kendale when they met to compare notes on the last night. This was still, as she had to remind herself, one of the first parties of the year. “Can’t you carry on for a bit?”

“I might rag the general,” Percy hazarded. “What was it he actually said?”

“‘I *know* you’re a good little girl’,” Gloria mimicked; “‘and *you* won’t tell.’ Old beast!” It was not an elegance of language to call people ‘old beasts’, but, in living with Bella Dixon, one picked up her speech. “And then he gave me a sovereign. I nearly stuffed it down his fat neck, but I thought I’d keep it as evidence. . . . Bella warned me that this was going to be a sticky party, but she never said *how* sticky.”

"We should have gone to pieces if it hadn't been for you, Gloria. By the way, are you going on from here to Melby?"

"I don't think I'm likely to have time."

The answer came in automatic reaction to an impulse which Gloria did not wait to examine. For three days she had endured the life that had been barely tolerable in the last year of the war, when Roper Dixon came home on leave and gave supper-parties in his rooms to Bella and any of her friends who might be in London. From morning till night there had been feverish activity, merciless noise and artificial high spirits stimulated by incessant rich food and supplementary drink. Now, the long hall, with its disordered furniture, its dishevelled, languid women and its hot, inane men, looked as if a destroying angel had passed through in the footsteps of a Bacchic procession. During the war, things were different: then every one was a little mad; and Gloria could look back on nights when she had been as dishevelled as any one, as abandoned as most; on nights, too, as there was no harm in admitting now, when she knew that she had drunk more champagne than was prudent; nights when she drank more champagne than was prudent and knew very little else.

On Bella's wedding-day she had bidden good-bye to the old life before it incapacitated her for every other. At Melby Court she could expect nothing but an expurgated edition of life at Abergeldy, with unguessed variations supplied by Freddie.

"I *said* I'd go there," grumbled Percy, "but I hear Rex Dropford and his wife are still in possession. What Freddie can see in that woman . . ."

Though Gloria would admit no interest in Freddie's private life, her nerves were so raw that she was irritated at being deceived by a man who she knew would always scheme to deceive her. In the train he had tried to propose again; he was going to Melby "like a dutiful son"; he had not mentioned other attractions than duty. Rex Dropford's wife, whoever she might be, was conveniently pigeon-holed against the day when Freddie should next expatiate on his singleness of heart:

"I don't know her."

"Pure vampire type," Percy drawled. "Freddie can afford to lose a little blood, but he's been making my people rather nervous ever since he set her up in that house in London. . . . D'you care to give us our revenge at poker?"

Gloria held out a bundle of unanswered letters as a pretext for going to her room. The only tolerable moment of her visit was that in which Norman wrote to ask if she could not come by an earlier train so that he might shew her the house

before the other guests arrived. He was thinking of her, then, night and day ; and, in her spiritual loneliness, she looked towards him as the most representative of her own people, in her own country. Gazing down from the gallery, she bade farewell to Abergeldy and its inmates. The Dixons based their ideals of decoration on the more modern hotels of London ; their party was like an armistice-night revel ; and her own place in it was that of a hired mountebank.

Pausing by her door, she saw Percy attaching himself to a group of men and heard him saying to the general : “ I’m going to have a drink. I *know* you’re a good old general, and *you* won’t tell.” A £1 note was exhibited furtively, to become the prize of a scramble. Roper told a whispered story that provoked a clatter of empty laughter ; and the general, looking up, called out : “ You’re not to listen, Gloria ; you’re too young.”

Resisting the temptation to box his ears for using her Christian name, she locked herself in her room and carried her neglected correspondence to the writing-table.

“ *Dearest Dot,*” she began ;

“ I promised to think over your suggestion and let you know the result. Before I say anything more, I want you to realize how touched I am by your sweetness in bothering about me at all. I talked to my father . . . ”

She paused to wonder whether the admiral was likely to see Mrs. St. John before they all met at Stratton Park and, if so, whether he would reveal that he had offered no objection to the hat-shop proposal. Extraordinary that he should suddenly lose all his self-respect ! Dot was an exception to all rules : otherwise, her suggestion would have been insulting. . . .

“ I can’t say my health won’t stand it,” she reflected, “ because every one knows I’ve the constitution of an ox. And, as father says, ‘ never waste a lie ’ . . . ”

“ I talked to my father,” she resumed ; *“ and, though there’s no one he’d rather see me with if I took up that kind of work at all, I could feel that he was opposed to the whole idea. In my heart of hearts I believe that he regards it as a little bit of a reflection on him if I say that I want to earn my own living . . . ”*

“ No, that’s a bit *too* thick ! ” she decided. “ Dot knows

far too much about us. . . . Now I suppose I shall have to rewrite the beastly thing. . . . And I *must* remember not to call things 'beastly' when I get to Newbridge." . . .

4

While she waited for the car to take her to the station next morning, Gloria passed the Abergeldy visit in review. In pocket she was somehow ten pounds to the good ; but any reckoning of spirits, vitality and temper shewed her to be insolvent :

" Board and lodging for three and a half days' experience ? "

It was interesting to find that Roper preserved the old custom of having the wine-glasses handed round inside the finger-bowls ; the admiral, prosing on the splendid past, had told her of that. Bella had lately introduced the new practice of putting a sealed notice in every guest's room, begging that no tips should be given to the servants. So many of the only friends she could collect were hardly able to pay for their railway-tickets ! Gloria was undecided whether she would invite to her own house people who could not afford to pay what the whole world paid ; they should retire from the struggle, like her own feeble friends from the convent. On the other hand, it was pleasant to side with a distinguished minority ; and Roper had said something about having borrowed the idea from the Duke of Marston when staying at Ambleside. If dukes had poor friends . . .

For constructive suggestions Gloria felt that she must wait until she reached Newbridge.

Strolling into the library, she devoted ten minutes to Trout and Walker's *History and Antiquities of Gloucestershire*.

" *When the ' new bridge ' was built over the Severn,*" she read, "*a natural frontier—hitherto impregnable—became a highway of traffic between east and west ; the country on either side of the river lay open to whosoever held the bridge-head ; and Newbridge Park—in old days ' Newbridge House ', ' New Bridge House ', the ' Bridge House ' or ' Brighthouse '—was built to command the passage of the river between Tewkesbury and Gloucester. The Bridge House, which has been in the uninterrupted possession of the Cartwright family since its construction, is no longer new in anything but name ; the outer works have disappeared, the plentiful scars of battle are swathed in tender*

ivy ; not again will it be held for the king, nor will a rebel army ever again beat unavailingly on its stubborn walls. Its need may be said to have passed with a changing political order, but the tradition lingers.” . . .

Gloria turned the words over on her tongue, as she drove to the station.

“ ‘*The tradition lingers*’. . . I rather like that,” she decided, as the train raced through the blighted coal-fields of South Wales into the lush green meadows and woodlands of the marches. “You feel that . . . with Norman . . . *I* can understand that,” she added, as though she were addressing him over the heads of an opposing army of Kendailles and Dixons.

At Gloucester station she caught sight of him half-way down the platform, glancing rapidly into each carriage as it passed. The trim, sturdy figure and prosaic face marked him less certainly the heir of a four-hundred-year-old tradition than the product of more material environment : Eton gave him a standard manner, Oxford a conventional outlook ; his tailor decided how he should dress, and the army had ordained that he should wear a small, wiry moustache.

“He looked more interesting in hospital,” Gloria had to confess, as she sought vainly for any distinguishing feature other than the square-bridged Cartwright nose.

Then their eyes met, and his face was transfigured. Hurrying to the door, he sprang on to the foot-board and shook hands with her through the window, smiling a welcome which made her feel, as in old days at Stratton Park and again that morning, that they did indeed understand each other :

“I can’t *tell* you how I’ve been looking forward to this ! Was it a frightfully early start ? I *did* so want to shew you the place before the other people came.”

Talking rapidly, with an ingenuous shyness that conflicted with his normal maturity of manner, he helped her out of the carriage and led her so precipitately to his car that her luggage was nearly left on the platform.

“I feel I know it already from your descriptions,” said Gloria, as they drove out of the city on the Tewkesbury road.

His only answer was a quick upward throw of his chin, as though to urge the car forward. There was a moment’s silence as they stopped by a gap in the screen of trees by the roadside ; a wooden seat, carved with the words *Presented by Sir William Cartwright Bart., 1856*, commanded the gap ; and, in a frame of spring foliage, Gloria beheld a gently sloping

valley-side, a foreshortened avenue of elms, a steel-blue belt of water and the squat grey cross of Newbridge. The vision, momentary and unexpected, was like a half-remembered dream ; before she could believe her eyes, the car, which had stopped without orders and as of ritual, moved slowly on.

" Sir Norman, how enchanting ! " she cried.

" It does . . . come up to the description ? " he asked with a laugh that failed to conceal the emotion stirred by her enthusiasm. " D'you know Leeds Castle, in Kent ? There's a certain similarity, but I suppose I can hardly be expected to admit a comparison."

" I was . . . reading about Newbridge this morning," she answered. " A tiresome book, but it spoke about the *tradition* of the place . . ."

" You've been reading Trout and Walker," he interrupted. " '*Its need may be said to have passed with a changing political order.*' . . ."

" '*But the tradition lingers !*' ," Gloria cried.

" How long . . ." Norman began, with his eyes on the derelict foundations of a municipal housing-scheme. " D'you care to get out and walk here ? It is worth it."

" It will remain as long as you remain here." As the car shot ahead and they set out across the park, Gloria recalled a phrase from one of his latest letters. " You weren't *serious* about selling it ? "

" I've been fighting my solicitor for weeks over that," Norman answered grimly. " *Sell . . . ? No ! . . .* But whether I can live here . . . I don't mind what happens in *my* lifetime so long as I can hand it on. We lived through one bad period after the South Sea Bubble . . . and another after the Napoleonic wars. . . . We shall weather this . . . somehow."

Gloria nodded sympathetically and walked in silence by his side, fearful—at a moment when she felt herself to be on trial—that she would seem too little impressed by the majesty of the house as it changed from dream to reality. It would be dreadful if she committed a Bella-Dixon blunder in architectural terms ! Dreadful if she made Freddie Kendaille's mistake of being secretly too much impressed by Norman's easy gait, backwards and forwards across the centuries.

" Have you a big party ? " she asked.

" About a dozen. The Thorpes. The Swans. May-Kingston and his wife. A certain number more are coming to dine." . . .

Though the names conveyed nothing to her, Gloria felt that these people must all be “leading lights of the county”. If she could but remember them, ten undisturbed minutes with *Who’s Who* would make her safe.

“It’s nice to find the big houses opening again,” she ventured, as they crossed the moat into a triangular paved garden and paced slowly round the flagged sentry-walk by the edge of the water. Though she had been too young to pay visits before the war, Gloria had heard Dot St. John employ this sentiment with comfortable familiarity at the first Penton Manor party after the armistice. “There was a time when I thought we’d seen the end of this kind of life.”

“My solicitor thinks so still,” Norman answered, without indicating whether she had struck the note appropriate to one who was coming back to her own country and her own people.

5

At the four extremities of the short-armed cross, Gloria was introduced to the entrance-hall and chapel, the library and banqueting-hall; outside there was a similar paved court-yard in each of the four angles, once a camping-ground for men-at-arms and a sanctuary for the people of the countryside when Newbridge was held against the troops of the Lord Protector. The draw-bridge had long since disappeared and been replaced by stone arches and a cobbled causeway broad enough—as Sir George, the Cartwright of Regency days, proved in victorious fulfilment of a wager with Lord St. Helens—to accommodate a coach and six (which had to be driven through the hall, round the oak table under the lantern and out again without scraping the wall on either side). The stamp of a foot at any point on the sentry-walk rang hollow over the dripping cellars and passages through which Norman alone knew his way; under the chapel stretched a crumbling chain of sagging brick vaults, once a means of escape and a channel for supplies to the beleaguered royalists.

As she peered by the light of a taper into this eerie tunnel, Norman confided to Gloria that it had long been his ambition to establish once and for all where this frantic defiance to starvation burrowed its way to the upper air.

“But I promised my father I wouldn’t go down till I was twenty-one,” he added. “And then the war came.”

The late Sir Edgar Cartwright seemed a stop to be pulled out with every confidence of success.

"Have you . . . a picture of your father?" Gloria enquired softly, as he led her into the gallery above the chapel.

Here another side of the family tradition manifested itself in the uniform skill of succeeding generations in having themselves painted by the most interesting artist of the day from Kneller to Watts.

"It's the one next to the window on this side," Norman answered, his eyes brightening at her interest. "*That's* the old miscreant who let us down over the South Sea Bubble," he added, with an unforgiving nod towards a Gainsborough so early as to be unrecognizable. "And that's his son, who pulled us up again. Here we are! Millais. One of the last pictures he painted." . . .

"And who are you going to get for yourself?"

"Oh, I don't know. I must see first if I can afford to live here."

Gloria was preparing to enhance his interest by intelligent suggestions, when she recalled the rambling conversations in which they had explored their way to friendship at the Stratton Park hospital. Norman's knowledge of art was limited by its connection with Newbridge; he could outlast her in certain periods of English portrait-painting; but in succeeding breaths he would give Constable and El Greco to a wrong century, because there were no Constables or El Grecos at Newbridge. He had an expert's eye for eighteenth-century French watches, because his grandfather had collected them; but he was unacquainted with Cosway, because the Cartwrights had not turned their attention to miniatures. So with books: Henry Fielding was credited—on inadmissible evidence—with having written a draft of *Amelia* at Newbridge, and the Cartwrights read their Fielding for the honour of the house; the other classic novelists had no such claim on their regard.

In their turn, the Cartwrights had reacted on Newbridge; and, when a gong began to boom in the central hall under the lantern, Gloria felt that she was being taken to lunch, between a double line of show-cases, in the South Kensington museum.

"It would never do to break the tradition," she murmured valiantly, against an unseemly sense of oppression.

"I sometimes think it's breaking of its own accord." Strolling to a window, Norman drew back the curtains to give her an uninterrupted view of the encircling woods. "In *my* lifetime I've seen the old order driven out inch by inch,

house by house. . . . Dalton Priory, Sedgely Court, Melby Court. . . .”

“ I’ve often stayed at Melby,” interrupted Gloria, “ but I never knew it was so near you.”

“ Oh, yes. . . . The Kendailles are the best of the newcomers, good landlords. . . . The people here feel, though, . . . well, just as you and I should feel if the entire royal family was wiped out in an earthquake and we had put over us some German princeling from Hesse-Saxe-Sigmaringen-Darmstadt. Melby is a good hotel for the Kendailles’ friends from London, and Gloucestershire is quite a good place for keeping an hotel.”. . .

Their initial shyness returned to make both self-conscious as they filed past the graven figures of a butler and two footmen to a dwarfed table in the middle of the dining-room. More strongly than at Stratton Park, under the amused observation of the other nurses, Gloria felt isolated and expectant : she wondered what these impassive servants made of their master’s whim in asking her to come before his other guests, what Norman made of it himself, what Lady Cartwright would make of it when she came.

“ Hasn’t your mother been painted ? ” she asked, with a glance round the portraits that had overflowed from the gallery.

“ Yes. . . . But it wasn’t satisfactory,” Norman answered shortly ; and Gloria was left wondering whether the vivacious original, who was at least no more satisfactory than her portrait, had been punished on leaving Newbridge by having all records of her tempestuous rule expunged. “ It’s in the house somewhere,” he added, as though she were tacitly charging him with a breach of tradition. “ We haven’t kept a strict chronological order. That one behind you, for instance, is a Romney.”

Gloria turned her head towards a shadowy corner where a single portrait hung, half hidden, between two tattered flags.

“ I can’t see it very well . . . ,” she began.

“ It’s not meant to be seen very well,” said Norman with a laugh. “ We’re not . . . altogether proud of that lady. There’s no mystery about it,” he added after a pause. “ You’ll find it in all the histories of the time. She ran away with the second Duke of Preston. There was a duel, and my great-great-great-grandfather brought her back. For the sake of the family. . . . She never left the house for more than thirty years. And in that time they never exchanged a word.”

Gloria caught herself shivering, less at the tale than at Norman's dispassionate telling of it :

"How awful !"

"It's difficult to know what he ought to have done," he confessed with knitted brows.

Their constraint wore off as the meal progressed, only descending upon them again when they were left alone with their coffee. The stiff formality of the house enshrined a distinction which Gloria sought in vain to find at Abergeldy Castle or Melby Court ; and, if at times she seemed to be lunching in a museum with its temporary curator, Windsor Castle was no less a museum ; succeeding kings might in a sense be regarded as temporary curators.

Finishing her coffee, she walked to the shadowy corner where Catharine Lady Cartwright smiled down through the ages with the soft, pagan promise of love which Romney had imprisoned in her eyes and lips.

"I wonder which of the present men will survive in a hundred years' time ?" she mused.

"For painting women ?"

As she turned away from him, Gloria was conscious that her cheeks were flushing :

"Yes."

"I'm appallingly ignorant about modern art, I'm afraid. Some day . . . when I have time . . ."

Silence fell upon them ; and, though her back was turned, Gloria knew that she was being watched eagerly. As though the unseen eyes were challenging her, she walked and stood, bent and straightened herself in exultant consciousness of her own bodily grace. When she joined him at the table, he fumbled with a match as if he had been caught spying on her.

"When do you expect the others ?" she asked.

"My mother's coming at four. We haven't much time," he answered, looking anxiously from his watch to the inviting sunshine of the courtyard.

"Do you mind if I rest before she comes ? The Dixons keep such terribly late hours."

As he bowed in a clumsy attempt to hide his disappointment, Gloria felt a glow of perilous tenderness. In spite of his rigid manner and ceremonial surroundings, Norman was engagingly callow. If she kept her head, she could do what she liked with him : his eager scrutiny of appraisal and shame-faced look of desire proved that. Always provided that she did not import the manners of Abergeldy

into Newbridge, always provided that the admiral did not lurch prematurely on to the stage, always provided that she could resist just this insidious feeling of tenderness, she could bring Norman to his knees and hers.

“ If you’re tired, of course . . . ”

His mingled chagrin and care tempted her to grant whatever he might ask ; it would be pleasanter to spend the next two hours with him, but it was perhaps more politic to be missed.

“ You’ll see me again at tea,” she smiled, as they went upstairs together and she hurried through a forest of lilac to a lancet-window at the top of three steps. “ Sir Norman, what a charming room you’ve given me ! ”

“ You like it ? Then, as a reward, *please* give up calling me ‘ Sir ’ Norman ! ”

“ If you’ll give up calling me ‘ Miss ’ Gloria ! Is that a bargain ? ”

She held out her hand to seal the compact and only withdrew it when the grip of Norman’s fingers, paralysing and unexpected as an electric-shock, reminded her that, in all present dealings, she had to keep her head.

CHAPTER TWO

NEWBRIDGE PARK

TYLTYL: How is it that I have not, like other men, the right to choose the woman I love?

THE GREAT
ANCESTOR: . . . Those who have lived in you live in you just as much as those who are going to . . .

TYLTYL: . . . And, . . . if I take a different girl from the one they want to force on me, what will they do then? . . .

THE GREAT
ANCESTOR: You will have made a mistake, you will be unhappy and, at the same time, you will make all of us unhappy, those who came before you as well as those who come after.

TYLTYL: Does that often happen?

THE GREAT
ANCESTOR: Very often, far too often: that is why you see so many unhappy people on earth.

—MAETERLINCK: *The Betrothal*.

I

GLORIA was locked in her room, tracking the house-party through the pages of *Who's Who*, when Lady Cartwright arrived with the expression of a cherub and the manner of an avenging angel.

Her shock-tactics preceded her, for at Gloucester station, as she could be heard proudly explaining, in a hoarse, high voice, she had driven away by herself in the Newbridge car after appropriating the luggage-cart for her own maid and leaving the others to follow by taxi. Between the hall and the library, audible in every word by any one overhead, she entrusted the butler with a sheaf of telegrams, instructed the housekeeper to see that she had a good fire in her room and sent a message to the cook that she was compelled by her doctor

to drink cocoa in place of tea. Then and not until then, though she had scattered her orders broadcast without slackening her pace across the hall, she was ready to meet her son ; and the library door closed on them.

With the first feeling of apprehension that she had known since leaving London, Gloria tidied herself in preparation for a meeting that obstinately presented itself to her imagination as a duel. Lady Cartwright, as an enemy, was only less dangerous than as a friend : the lashings of her reckless tongue echoed huskily in an annual round from London to Paris, from Paris to Monte Carlo and from Monte Carlo to Aix. Her genius for making enemies was only matched by her skill and persistence in being invited a second time to the house which she had devastated at her first attack. The ready tears of chronic neurosis were mistaken for sensibility ; a lisp and a baby face secured that, at forty-nine, she should still be regarded as a child ; and the mournful, if wholly unhistorical, tale of her youth tethered to her wheels an unfailing succession of middle-aged bachelors, who brought their leave and money from the colonies and America, supported her for three months and confided to older and more sceptical victims that they alone knew what hardships a singularly sweet woman had endured from a bully of a husband and a prig of a son.

Gloria had been fed with Mary Cartwright stories for half a dozen years before she met Norman ; but, until she heard the croak that had killed so many stainless reputations and extorted so much undeserved charity, she had never fancied that she might one day tremble under its castigation. She was still rehearsing a demure entrance when a rapid conversation broke upon her hearing, this time from under her window, in alternating staccato comments from Lady Cartwright and an indistinguishable murmur from Norman. Stealing across the room, Gloria looked down on the hat and cloak of a restless woman who was sitting on the low, stone window-ledge, with her body in the courtyard and her feet in the library. Impatient heels drummed a tattoo on the wooden floor ; thin hands tore feverishly at the flowers and moss that protruded through the loosely-spaced flags ; her face, when she sent her hat skimming through the window, twitched under its heavy make-up.

"I want to hear about this party," proclaimed a throaty voice, irrepressible as the glittering fingers. "I had to throw over all sorts of things to come here, I may tell you ; so in future you must give me longer notice—or—better still—marry a wife who can entertain for you. Which reminds me ! I

saw Millicent Buckwell the other day, so I invited her down here ; she's coming by that four-something."

Norman's voice, soothing in tone by comparison with his mother's, conveyed an answer that was the reverse of soothing.

" Rubbish, my dear boy ! I know the size of this house quite as well as you do," floated up to Gloria as she withdrew from the window, waiting for the cough that never came to ease Lady Cartwright, and registered the name of Millicent Buckwell for future enquiry. " You ought to be very grateful to me. A charming girl with lots of money—and more when her father dies— . . . "

Norman's unheard interruption could be guessed from his mother's comment on it :

" Then you might do a lot worse than begin thinking now. If *you* don't marry her, some one else *will*. Oh, Norman, that reminds me ! I made a small fortune at Monte Carlo. . . . Yes, but, unfortunately, I spent half in Paris on the way home and lost the other half at bridge. I've had an appalling winter at bridge. . . . Sometimes I wonder whether I can afford the flat. If your father had known how really *impossible* it would be for me to live on five thousand a year with these present prices . . . "

This time it seemed as if Norman found anticipation more politic than his habitual silence.

" I don't suppose for a moment you can," Lady Cartwright answered, as his voice died away. " That's why you should sell it. If you get anything of a price, you'll be very rich. One of these war-profiteers. . . . Oh, *indeed* ! " The racing voice became warlike. " *I* might give you *my* income to spend *here* ! That's very kind of you, Norman ! It hasn't occurred to you that you might buy a decent house in London ? . . . Sooner or later. . . . Well, we won't discuss it, if you're going to be rude. Your own mother. . . . You haven't yet told me who's coming."

As the names were given out, Lady Cartwright received them with an indiscriminating ferocity that reminded Gloria of the Queen of Hearts in the trial scene :

" *Dreadfully* tiresome they both are ! . . . Oh, my *dear* ! Where do you *find* these people ? . . . May-Kingston ? I know the *name*. . . . Oh, of course, the great contractor ! Has he a daughter ? Well, you should make it your business to find out. . . . *Who* ? . . . Norman, are you seeing just how terrible you can make this party ? He's an *impossible*

bore. . . . Oh, yes, I didn't think I should be spared them !
. . . . Who ? *Who* ? Where did you come across *her* ? ”

Though the name had been inaudible, Gloria was sure that it must have been her own ; and from the unconcealed relish in Lady Cartwright's tone she judged that Norman had introduced it too much as a careless afterthought.

The words of the answer could not be distinguished ; but, to Gloria's fancy, his voice seemed to swell with the vigour of chivalry.

“ What's she like ? ” interrupted Lady Cartwright. There was silence, a laugh, then silence again. “ She got those from her mother. . . . No, you're *not* good at descriptions. . . . Still, you've described your *attitude* to her. . . . Do you know anything about her people ? ”

Almost before Norman began to speak, he was interrupted with an unqualified contradiction :

“ Her mother's been dead these *twenty* years ! I can't remember her name, but she was rather a well-known Spanish singer. Arthur Britton lived with her until she died. The woman you've met is one of your Gloria's step-mothers ; but I'm rather rusty on my ‘ Discounted Families and Disbanded Gentry ’ where the admiral is concerned. . . . My little Norman Head-in-air, you *have* been making some funny friends ! ”

Gloria hesitated between window and door, undecided whether it was better to break in on the conversation before her case could be prejudiced further or to hear, without revealing that she had heard, the full indictment against her father and herself.

“ de Valtierre ! ” exclaimed Lady Cartwright in triumph, once more interrupting her son's expostulations. “ It wasn't her name, but it's what she called herself, . . . as an English chorus-girl might call herself St. Maur. . . . I don't mind it, myself : if a man has a *liaison* with an opera-singer, that's *his* affair. I shouldn't do it myself, but that's *my* affair. Your father would have had a fit if I'd invited any of that lot here ; it's a thoroughly rotten stock on the father's side ; and on the mother's too, I should think. I warn you that, if your Gloria is even one half a Britton, she knows much more about spending money than saving it. . . . It's curious what bad marriages the Cartwrights make.” . . .

An indignant outburst was checked by Lady Cartwright's shrill and slightly malicious laugh :

“ Well, if you take my advice, you *won't* ! . . . I should

be the last to suggest you shouldn't have an *affaire* with her ; it might make you almost human. . . . Amuse yourself with Gloria and marry Millicent Buckwell," she counselled, less with conviction—to judge by her tone—than with an idea of giving the conversation a neat finish, as she disappeared through the library window.

2

Gloria waited till her cheeks had lost their flush ; then she made her way downstairs. An afternoon designed to render Norman acutely conscious of her absence had proved unexpectedly profitable in rendering her acutely conscious of certain unforeseen obstacles.

She reached the library to find that Lady Cartwright had drunk her cocoa and retired to her room until three other players could be found to join her at bridge. Coming responsibilities had already cast their shadows on Norman's frowning face ; and she had to remind him of her absence by threatening to desert him again in the moment when his responsibilities were laid aside.

"Am I likely to see any of the Kendales while I'm here ? " she asked at the end of tea. "If not, I ought to write. Freddie wants me to go on from here."

"He's dining to-night," Norman answered with unexpected indifference to the challenge of the Christian name. "At least . . . I invited him, but my mother says there's *one* woman in his party. . . . I've got the old Bishop of Porchester coming ; and I don't quite know what to do about it." . . .

"I should put her next to the bishop and leave him to reclaim her," Gloria laughed, though she was stung a second time to think that Freddie was less her private property than she had fancied.

"You're sitting between Sir Hilary Thorpe and Mr. May-Kingston," Norman announced, as he bent over the plan of the table. "I wish I could have you next to me." . . .

"You'll have seen enough of me before the week-end's over ! "

"I was so terribly afraid you'd refuse," Norman murmured with tragic earnestness.

A sound of voices and footsteps warned Gloria that she could afford to relax for this moment without fear of urging him too fast :

"Have I ever refused anything you've asked me ? "

For the next hour she yielded place to the new-arrivals, only coming to the front when Norman took her to be introduced to his mother. Though half-past seven was striking as they entered the drawing-room, Lady Cartwright was still at the bridge-table ; upstairs, if Norman knew anything of her ways in other people's houses, she had posted her maid at the door of the nearest bath-room, and, if he knew anything of the maid, she was keeping every one else's servant at bay with a judicious blend of Parisian insolence and crude pleasantry.

To Gloria's critical judgement, there was less antagonism than curiosity in the reception accorded her.

"I've known the admiral for many years," said Lady Cartwright, as she turned to shake hands. "You don't take after him at all. That's well, because he's getting much too bloated. You shouldn't drag your hair down over your ears like that : it hides the bone-work of the head, and you've beautiful bones. Has any one said anything ?" she enquired with a rapid transference of interest. "Two diamonds ? And *you* said two hearts ? Then I shall say two no trumps."

As she went to her room, Gloria was assured by Norman, more for his own satisfaction than as any explanation of his mother, that she had made a good impression ; he might have added that Lady Cartwright was holding good cards and that her temper varied with her hand ; but, so far as Gloria could judge, Norman never criticized his mother privately nor lost patience with her publicly. And, remembering her own periodical scenes with the admiral, Gloria found in this restraint one more lesson to learn from Newbridge and one more quality to love in Norman.

"We dine at half-past eight," he told her, as they parted at her door. "There's a short service in the chapel at a quarter-past, but you needn't bother about that unless you like."

"I should like to come, if I may," answered Gloria as she tried to remember whether she had packed a suitable scarf to wear on her head.

"I'll call for you and shew you the way," he promised. "Good-bye, Gloria."

As he ran to his room, she felt that Norman was savouring the bouquet of her name as she had savoured, throughout the day, that phrase about the Cartwright tradition. He repeated it when he came to escort her downstairs ; and in the introductions that had still to be made he lingered lovingly over Miss "Gloria" Britton.

"Gloria Britton . . . Gloria Cartwright. . . . It goes beautifully," she decided, before setting herself to memorize the names and dignities of all the strange old men about her.

The silver-haired saint in purple coat and breeches was the Bishop of Porchester ; but, as she was unlikely to meet him again for the present, there was no need to study his biography. On the other hand, it was vitally important to hear whether he was addressed as "Bishop" or "My Lord" or "My Lord Bishop". The judge of assize, who seemed to take precedence of every one, including the women, was "Sir Henry" to Lady Cartwright, "Judge" to Mr. May-Kingston and "Sir" to Norman. Mr. Justice Bemerton's biography, too, could be disregarded until the local people had been disentangled : Colonel Swan, who might have stepped out of a Leech drawing, could be recognized anywhere as a master of hounds, and Gloria hardly needed to be told that Lord Rainborough, dandiacal and debonair, was the big political influence of the neighbourhood ; but of Sir Hilary Thorpe, a parchment-faced, stooping snuff-taker in a blue dress-coat with brass buttons, she knew only that he was or had been high sheriff of the county.

"And what a high sheriff is . . ." Gloria whispered to herself. "I thought they had to . . . *hang* people. I must go carefully, I've not met a party like this before. I suppose this is about top-notch England, . . . though they're only baronets." . . .

As they moved towards the chapel door, a voice, dilating on a signed photograph, explained that "he used to shoot here every year when he was Prince of Wales" ; and, for a moment in which her heart seemed to stand still, Gloria saw herself entertaining generations of princes and heard the very whisper of envious respect from Mrs. St. John and her like. "*I was at school with her*", the convent girls would boast. "*Gloria Cartwright ? Oh, a darling !*" Dot would gush. "*No mother, poor child, so you may say I really brought her up.*" . . . Gloria reflected grimly that the upbringing had nearly marooned her in a hat-shop ; but she could hold her own now against friend and foe, not excluding the scornful lady who went about saying : "de Valtierre ! It wasn't her name, but it's what she called herself, . . . as an English chorus-girl might call herself St. Maur." . . .

Though the ritual of the service was unfamiliar, Gloria made up for her lack of knowledge by the intensity of her devotion. The "Newbridge technique", she reflected, as she put away

her scarf and tidied her hair, could be learned as well as another : the looks and murmurs of the men, clumsy as everything masculine always had to be, testified to the interest which she aroused ; and, when Norman welcomed her smilingly at the foot of the stairs, she felt that he was finding her worthy of the Cartwright tradition.

"We're only waiting now for the Melby car," he explained at large to the cluster of small groups by the big stone fireplace in the central hall.

Five conversations, suspended for a moment, resumed their deep mutter. Sir Hilary, between snuffing and dusting, was wondering how long the great houses could keep their doors open in defiance of the attack first launched by the Harcourt death-duties and now pressed home by the crippling taxation of the war. The country, opined Colonel Swan, would recover soon enough if people worked ; but these trades unions would not *let* a man work, and little improvement could be expected until a few of the agitators had been put against a wall and shot. He appealed for support to Mr. May-Kingston ; but, under cover of a debate on judicial salaries with Sir Henry Bemerton, the wary contractor was watching his young host's easy handling of a conventional situation which others might have bungled. Unconscious that he was being appraised in terms of his utility to the firm of May-Kingston, Power and Watson, Norman was discussing with Lord Rainborough the prospects of a general election.

"With your name . . ." Gloria heard.

"You know, sir, this is the first parliament since the Reform Bill without a Cartwright in it ?" Norman asked. "If I thought I could afford the time and the money . . ."

Mindful of Dot St. John's advice that a girl should ingratiate herself first with the women of any party, Gloria crossed to the sofa where Mrs. May-Kingston was talking to the bishop's wife. It was very necessary to find what these good creatures discussed and to think out something worth saying to each. Books and theatres were quickly exhausted with people who seemed to subsist on Anthony Trollope and *The Field* ; and, when they discussed politics or the war, Gloria felt that their little family-group was administering a big estate and that the rest of the population consisted of mere millions to be marched on to the field of battle or into the polling-booth by the members of a caste which was born to rule. The Rainborough boys took charge of the family estate on its naval side ; the Swans passed, in generation after

generation, into the army ; and a Thorpe was always to be found drifting about the world from one diplomatic post to another. They could not understand rich young idlers like the Kendailles ; and no doubt they resented the attempt of the middle classes to thrust their young St. Johns into the family management as bitterly as Dot St. John would resent being called a member of the middle classes.

To Gloria it was all a little bewildering, a little solemn ; she was more at ease with the Dixons, but then the Dixons did not represent territorial power.

3

Reverie and conversation alike were interrupted by the arrival of the butler with a telegram.

" It's from Millicent," Norman told his mother. " She's missed the 4.30 and is coming by the next. Dining on the train."

Gloria was trying to estimate the support of the eligible Miss Buckwell's personality in an attack by Lady Cartwright on Norman, when the Melby car arrived and Freddie Kendaille ushered his own guests into the hall through a ghostly guard of damascened armour. For a moment of disabling nervousness Gloria felt that his quick glance had taken in judge of assize, bishop and high sheriff and that his ironical smile, as ever puckering his eyes, demanded to know what 'the admiral's' daughter was doing in such a gallery and how Newbridge compared with Roper Dixon's old supper-parties in Half Moon Street. Avoiding his eyes, she looked rapidly at the overdressed, assertive woman by his side, then at her somnolent young husband ; the two men, she rejoiced to see, had come in black ties, and their faint flavour of impropriety, stealing into this splendid world of immemorial dignity, separated the newcomers as though they belonged to a lower order of creation.

" Don't tell me you and I have been kept waiting all this time for a damned gombeen-man ! " Sir Hilary murmured to Gloria ; and, if she needed proof that she was in her own country, among her own people, the words supplied it.

" I hope we're not late, Norman," murmured Freddie, as the introductions came to an end. " I didn't know you had a party. . . . Well, Gloria ? I hope I'm going to be allowed to sit next to you. No ? How sad ! . . . Did you have an

amusing time at Abergeldy? And did you like the old general?"

"He was a horrible old man!" answered Gloria, as they separated into couples. "A horrible party." . . .

"I hope you'll enjoy yourself more here."

"I hope so. In fact, I know I shall . . . if *you* behave yourself properly," she added in a tone that was half threat, half supplication.

A moment later the stocky form and naked scalp of Mr. May-Kingston divided them; and Gloria took her place in the procession to the dining-room, where the Olympian butler who had frozen her at luncheon now indicated, almost without resentment, her place half-way down the table.

"We must keep on Manners at all costs," she decided. "He'll help me no end about precedence and things. . . . I can explain that I was brought up abroad. . . . And I must find out if he's Manners or Manders. Butlers love you to realize that they *have* names." . . .

Throughout the meal she strained her attention to catch the psychological atmosphere of the party. Sir Hilary, she found, could be kept talking with a well-placed "How right you are" or "I do *so* agree!"; and, if Mr. May-Kingston, who was nothing like so stolid as he seemed, took in more than he gave out, she had no difficulty in persuading him to an innocuous flirtation. From time to time Lady Cartwright's recklessness of speech plunged one half of the table in sombre embarrassment; Freddie's common little bird-of-paradise friend Mrs. Dropford was jealous when he spoke to his other neighbour; and Colonel Swan's manner relaxed with his third glass of champagne. . . .

"Otherwise . . . the top-notch people are only a bit more stodgy than the rest," she concluded.

Before such an audience the habit of decorum was so agreeable that she stiffened unconsciously when Freddie sauntered across the drawing-room in his disgraceful soft shirt and black tie.

"My mother charged me to give you her love," he began ceremoniously, "and to say that we all hope you're coming on to Melby when you leave here." In a confidential undertone he added: "You'll be dancing-mad after a week-end of this."

The tone of sneering impatience urged Gloria once and for all to indicate her right to a place, which he seemed to be repudiating for them both, in Norman's world.

"It's so peaceful here," she answered, turning to watch the glint of moonlight on the moat.

"I've heard the same tribute paid to a graveyard," Freddie answered. "My dear, don't you feel that you and I and the Dropfords and perhaps Lady Cartwright are the only live creatures in an assembly of corpses? This is 1920! We've had a somewhat disturbing war! With a trifling change or two, you'd say this was 1750!"

"But is it the worse for that? It's pleasant to find a place where . . . the old tradition . . . lingers. I feel so wonderfully at home."

"You're so wonderfully adaptable! It's picturesque, but you don't *believe* in it!" His quick glance at the corner where Lord Rainborough was exchanging courtly epigrams with the bishop desecrated the foreground of Gloria's picture. "Old Swan and May-Kingston are real, because people for some reason do take hunting seriously and because bricks and mortar are real things. The rest is . . . Byzantine! Bishops in a dying church, political leaders of dead parties!"

"They're the leaders of the nation," Gloria maintained.

"That may have been true when Disraeli was describing this kind of thing in his novels; but their power's gone. In 1920, if you want to collect the people who influence thought and control events, you must have Leverhulme and J. H. Thomas and Bottomley and the head of Scotland Yard and my poor old father, if he wasn't so seedy. . . . 1750. . . . Yes! The aristocracy was giving place to the middle classes throughout the nineteenth century. . . . People like my father, . . . bankers, manufacturers, newspaper-proprietors. And we shall have to give place to the working classes in the twentieth. If Norman doesn't see that yet, he'll see it when he compares the cost of this place with what it brings him."

"You can't reduce everything to pounds, shillings and pence," said Gloria, rising as Norman began to arrange the tables for bridge.

"If you're clever enough to make money . . ."

"You'll still find there are some things . . . and some traditions . . . and some people . . . that you can't buy."

Before he could answer, Freddie was caught up in a bridge-four, while Norman, with ill-concealed satisfaction at his strategy, led Gloria to a sofa where they could talk without being overheard.

"You don't mind sitting out one rubber?" he asked. "I wanted to say that I hope you won't have to go back on

Monday. I know there's nothing to do. . . . It's an elderly party." . . .

At the eagerness and diffidence in his voice, Gloria found herself bathed in sudden warmth.

"I'd love to, if I could," she sighed, keeping her eyes averted for fear that their radiance would betray her. "I'm at *peace* here . . . But I *don't* like to disappoint dear old Mrs. Kendaille; she's always so sweet . . ."

"Can't you come back here?"

"I daren't throw Dot St. John over." Gloria debated for a moment whether the true pathos of her vagabond life would alienate Norman or stir his chivalry. "You can't afford to offend people if you've no home of your own."

"But . . . I thought you lived with your father."

Gloria sighed wistfully and shook her head:

"I can always have a corner in father's rooms, but I'm the 'country-house girl,' pure and simple. It's a little wearing." Growing unconscious of her audience, she described the fatigue of her normal life until they were interrupted by a deferential cough. "Your butler's trying to speak to you."

Norman's startled turn betrayed that he had been watching her too closely to remember there was any one else in the room. Once her lips had trembled so much that she hesitated before going on; once her black eyes, still averted from him, had grown perilously bright.

"Miss Buckwell has arrived, Sir Norman," said Manners.

"Oh? Excuse me, Gloria; I must see if she's had a proper dinner."

As he hurried out of the room, Gloria picked up a paper and looked with unseeing eyes at the illustrations. Tired by her visit to Abergeldy and shy in a new house full of strangers, she no longer saw herself as future hostess to the Prince of Wales. Peace was so needful to her, and Norman offered it so tenderly, that, when Freddie laid down his cards and crossed the room to rejoin her, she ordered him back to the table before he could disturb her conception of the essential Gloria Britton.

As she yielded to her dream, Carlton House Chambers and the admiral were forgotten; forgotten were the rowdiness of Bella Dixon's friends and her own inexplicable vulgarity in

playing the fool for their delectation. More strongly than in the train a week before, more compellingly than when she saw Lady Dixon with Abergeldy Castle as her background, Gloria felt that this was her due and natural home. The three bridge-tables, with their long silences and abrupt bursts of discussion, the lazily conversational group by the fire, the gold-brocaded Jacobean chairs and the seasoned Knellers and Hoppners on the white panels behind her suggested a scene on some abnormal stage, with herself to the fore, monopolizing the dramatic interest; she realized that all such scenes were modelled on rooms like this and that she was half-consciously playing a part in conventional, standardized surroundings. Though she played it well enough to convince herself, she feared that any contact with Freddie's material mind would make her feel that she had no right there.

"Providence *intends* me to talk to you," he announced three minutes later. "Once more I'm dummy. What's happened to Norman?"

"He'll be back in a minute. Miss . . . Buckwell, is it? Miss Buckwell has just arrived," Gloria answered.

"Millicent Buckwell. . . . H'm." Freddie's eyes turned cautiously to the door with a flash of malice. "Well, the man who marries her will have to fetch and carry for so much of his life that, the sooner he gets into training for it, the better." Without looking up, Gloria knew that he was watching to see whether she would betray herself, even by excessive indifference. "That's the worst of your rich American girl." . . .

"You're keeping them all waiting, Freddie," she interrupted.

After refusing to be drawn even by the bait of Miss Millicent Buckwell, Gloria felt no obligation to endure further onslaughts of curiosity. As Freddie seated himself, with a last careless glance in her direction, she enjoyed a moment's idle amusement at his mystification: how *could* any one else hope to succeed where he, with Melby and the reversion of John Kendaille's estate, had failed? Put two and two together: how *could* Norman afford to lose the chance of marrying Miss Buckwell, unless indeed he hoped to exploit the little bald contractor?

"You'd be very contemptuous if you thought love had anything to do with it," she whispered in answer to the latest of his baffled glances of enquiry.

Until Lady Thorpe gave the signal for departure, Gloria devoted her attention to Miss Buckwell, deciding at the end

hat, even without Norman's chill reception of her name, there was no rivalry to fear from a vain and spoilt young beauty, who flaunted her wealth in conversation no less than in appearance.

"It's hardly worth taking the trouble to be friends with her. . .," she decided. "But I want every one to like me." . . .

As her position had first to be established with her future neighbours, she accepted a glass of soda-water and a cigarette from Lord Rainborough, only allowing her attention to wander when Mr. May-Kingston bandied impressive figures in her hearing.

"I'm afraid it's out of the question, sir," Norman declared. "If I farmed my own land, perhaps . . . But as long as I'm liable for my mother's jointure . . ."

"Well, if business has any attraction for you . . . You remember our conversation after your father's death. . . . My old plans were . . . rather upset when Roy was killed. . . .," Mr. May-Kingston answered. Then the discussion was interrupted by Freddie's bringing his party to say good-bye. "Odd fellow that," he commented, when Norman returned to him.

In her effort to hear from another set of lips why Freddie always left an unfavourable impression on men, Gloria could spare but scant attention for Lord Rainborough's account of the armistice election.

"He's a bit conceited," Norman was answering, "but then he has a good deal to be conceited about. Very able, very good-looking . . . Did very well in the war . . ."

"I'd sooner go tiger-shooting with an honest coward than with a man I couldn't trust. You're hardly old enough to remember, but he was mixed up in rather an unpleasant divorce-case some years ago. . . . And he let the woman down. . . . I remember, too, he had the effrontery to say 'My lord, I am a man more kissed against than kissing.'"

"Which is probably true," laughed Norman; "though it's not a thing one says."

"Especially if you spend all your life trying to make women in love with you. . . . Where he gets it from I don't know; his father was always a decent, dry old stick . . . I daresay I'm full of prejudices, but I'd always say: 'Distrust people who want to hurry off to the ladies when a proper man should be drinking his wine like a gentleman (that was good port you gave us); distrust any man in the prime of life who smokes

cigarettes when he's been offered a decent cigar ; distrust a man who paws and whispers.' And now, having abused one of your guests, I'd better go to bed. Good-night."

An hour later, the house was silent and dark. As she opened her window, Gloria wondered which was Norman's room and whether he was yet asleep. Perhaps he was telling himself that in eight hours' time he would see her again ; perhaps he was contriving to steal away alone with her next day ; perhaps he was preparing his speech.

A sense of eternal calm took possession of her as she leaned her bare arms on the warm stone of the window-ledge. Already she was become a part of Newbridge : its spirit held her, as its tradition had captivated her.

"I've . . . come home," she whispered to the night.

The brooding calm was broken by a metallic rattle ; and the window opposite her own was flung open. In its dark frame Norman's face gleamed ghostly in the moonlight as he too bent forward for a last look at the white-flagged courtyard, the ivy-mantled walls and black containing moat. Gloria lowered her eyes. Perhaps he saw her ; but their union of souls would have been shattered if he had made a sign.

5

Though she paid tribute to the genius of Newbridge next morning by attending prayers in the chapel, Gloria became conscious at the beginning of breakfast that others had been afoot even before her. Urged to his duties by a timid young marshal, the judge had already left ; the bishop was hurrying to catch an early train ; and, though Lady Cartwright remained in her room, composing costly and piquant telegrams in answer to her morning's letters, Gloria seemed to trace her finger in the elaborate and unalterable arrangements that were being made for the survivors of the party.

"The Kendailles want us all to spend the day at Melby," Norman explained with a frown that argued battle and, not improbably, defeat. "I'm tied to the estate-office for the morning, but I might walk over and drive you home to lunch. I've seen absolutely nothing of you, Gloria."

"My dear, you had me all to yourself yesterday !" she laughed. "Won't . . . Miss Buckwell think you're rather neglecting her ?"

The frown on Norman's face deepened ; and Gloria found

herself being led away to the sentry-walk by the side of the moat.

"It's so awkward about her," he confided. "My mother's convinced that I'm in love with her; and nothing I can do . . ."

Encouraged by the sympathy of silence, he embarked on a confused but uniformly ingenuous account of a relationship that had begun some months before the war with Lady Cartwright's request that he should be kind to her little friend from America and had ripened alarmingly to the point at which Mrs. Buckwell ostentatiously left him alone with her daughter and, when nothing came of that, wrote significantly to Lady Cartwright: "*I'm so dreadfully worried about my little darling: she seems so wretchedly unhappy about something.*". . .

"I don't know that you ought to be telling me all this," said Gloria, when the confession was completed.

"I . . . But . . . Well, I don't know what to do about it," Norman stammered.

"I should have thought she'd have . . . suited you rather well, Norman," Gloria ventured, as she felt herself strong enough to take risks.

"I don't believe you care. . .," he muttered; then his habitual reserve cut short the petulant outbreak, and he added: "one way or the other."

"My dear, you *know* I should like to see you happy," answered Gloria softly, as she turned towards the house.

The thunderous personality of Lady Cartwright seemed to have blown away by the time that the car wound along the road to the links. Two miles ahead, the smoke of the Melby chimnies curled in trembling wreaths above the dividing coppice of Poplar Ridge. Behind, grey and impregnable within its protecting ring of water, lay the great stone cross of Newbridge. Though she now felt able to meet Freddie without constraint, Gloria looked forward to her return with an eagerness that betrayed itself in hammering pulses. It was necessary to keep her nerves steady; and she was thankful that for two hours she would be too busily occupied to think overmuch of the afternoon.

"A stroke a hole?" Freddie asked her at the first tee.

"I'll play you level and beat you," she answered. "I can't *help* winning to-day."

One o'clock had already chimed from the carillon-tower by the Melby stables before she caught sight of Norman and Millicent Buckwell taking a short cut by the eighteenth green.

His expression betrayed impatience ; and Gloria wondered whether he objected to seeing her with Freddie or was himself embarrassed by the unsought devotion of his companion.

" I hoped to be here long ago," he explained, when she commented on his knitted brows, " but the neighbourhood seems to have been lying in wait for me ever since I came out of hospital. Cricket clubs, flower-show committees, territorial associations. And now Rainborough wants me to stand for parliament."

His gaze rested in passing resentment on Freddie, who, less conscientious, had enjoyed the society which he had denied himself.

" I should let some one else have a turn," suggested Gloria. " After all, you've only one life ; and you ought to live it as you please."

Involuntarily Norman looked back over the rolling meadows through which the sinuous line of the Severn shone blue in the mid-day sunshine. His expression hardened to hostility when he turned to the aggressive red-brick front of Melby Court.

" I wonder how much *any* of us can live our own lives," he murmured. " There are so many people who depend on you." . . .

A mocking laugh from Freddie shewed that he had been overheard :

" Don't be 'county', Norman ! "

" Don't mind *him*," Gloria whispered.

" I don't. . . . And I don't really feel I've any cause to grumble. After all, we *take* a tremendous lot *out* of life ; the least we can do is to put back as much as we take out. That's not a fashionable doctrine nowadays." . . .

" But the tradition . . . still survives," answered Gloria, pressing his arm as they mounted the steps to the terrace in front of the house.

Her quick touch, communicating the first affection or interest that she had shewn him, cleared a jungle of timidities and pretences from between them. As the muscles in his arm tightened under her fingers, Gloria found the lines of the house blurred to her sight ; and she had to wait for a wave of giddiness to pass before she could go forward to the long wicker-chair from which old John Kendaile was regarding her with sombre eyes. To her right, at the corner of the house, Mrs. Kendaile's white hair flashed restlessly behind the briar-hedge of the rose-garden ; and the vigorous snipping of

her scissors cut sharply through the quivering mid-day heat. Gloria realized that the news of her engagement would perhaps be a greater shock to these old people, who had now so little time to put any one in her place, than for Freddie himself, who could find a wife any day among the women who rated material comfort higher than physical fidelity.

It would be a shock for poor Millicent Buckwell, who would now have to begin all over again. . . .

Gloria found her moment of universal tenderness cut short by the appearance of two footmen with a trestle-table and a tray of bottles and glasses. The terrace, almost deserted a moment since, filled suddenly, like the stage of a musical comedy before the final *ensemble*. Through one window, Mrs. Dropford emerged with a cigarette in one hand, a shady hat in the other ; her husband sauntered into view with a crumpled bunch of papers under his arm ; and the golf-players, straggling conversationally across the lawn, collected themselves at the terrace-steps. Gloria was reminded of an hotel verandah at Frinton. With Norman at her side, she felt that the Kendailles, for all their kindness, were wofully commonplace.

As at the *ensemble* of a musical comedy, the peace of the scene, a moment since unbroken, fled startled away. Flushed and thirsty, the players seated themselves on the stone parapet and discussed the game at the top of their voices without attending to what any one else was saying ; old Mr. Kendaile, white of hair and waxen of skin, watched them with the fascinated interest of a child first brought to see a row of lusty young cormorants at feeding-time ; Mrs. Kendaile sent one of the footmen round with cigarettes, and Freddie threw an occasional quick glance of amusement at the company as he poured and measured from one bottle after another.

" I believe my epitaph will be : ' He introduced cocktails into Gloucestershire, ' " he predicted sleepily. " Who knows ? I may become a figure like Raleigh. Pilgrims will follow in my footsteps, pursuing a pious if zig-zag course ; and the oldest inhabitant will mumble at them from toothless gums, telling them how he's lived here, boy and man, for eighty years and *he* can remember when there wornt no zuch thing as a cocktail, master, in these parts. . . . I should be inclined to cast Norman for the oldest inhabitant, if he'd only grow a Newgate fringe. Norman can recall when the Great Western first came to Gloucester ; he was a mere boy at the time, but he remembers walking in front of the engine with a red flag.

Have a cocktail, gaffer, and let's loosen that old tongue of yours ! ”

Gloria laughed because the others, including Norman, were laughing ; but she added this exhibition of malice to her score against Freddie. To the judgement of even a prejudiced woman, he was the best-looking man there ; his flannel trousers and silk shirt made every one else look either over-dressed or dishevelled ; and his intelligence was on a level with his looks. For all his accomplishments, however, the neighbourhood still withheld the recognition to which he felt entitled ; and his scoffing betrayed a sense of grievance every time he cried “ Don't be ‘ county ’, Norman.”

“ I wish you and Gloria would stay to lunch,” Mrs. Kendaile urged, as the laughter died away. “ If you were to telephone . . . ”

“ It's very kind of you, but I hardly like to desert my other guests,” Norman answered. “ In fact, if my car's ready . . . ”

He looked interrogatively at Gloria, who smiled and nodded.

“ Another cocktail first,” Freddie proposed. “ You'll be so much brighter at lunch. I made up my mind years ago that the only way to treat the old fossils about here was to fill them three-parts full of neat spirit on arrival, hustle them in to dinner, mix their drinks before they were in a condition to see what was happening and then pack them home before they came to . . . ”

“ Freddie ! ” expostulated Mrs. Kendaile.

“ But it's true ! Remember the scandal of the missing archdeacon ! He'd slipped under the table half-way through dinner, and the party broke up without noticing that he'd disappeared. One of the servants, of course, has orders to collect the dead bodies of all ‘ old Gloucestershire worthies ’ ; and the archdeacon was picked up with the rest. For three days there was a hue and cry ; then the poor old man sighed, opened his eyes and found himself alive and anything but well, half-buried in an ash-pit. I could tell you no end of stories about this comic country.”

6

As Norman took his leave, Gloria went indoors for her coat, and Freddie followed to help her find it.

“ Well, were you down in time for prayers ? ” he asked

when they were alone. "Ah! I *thought* there was something other-worldly about you to-day. It must be hard work to live up to Norman's standard."

The night before, Gloria had been infuriated by his calm assumption that she belonged to a different social order from Newbridge; now she felt that Norman himself was the best judge.

"He lets his guests do what they like," she answered; "which is my idea of a good host."

"Well, you always do what you like here."

"I don't always like what I do, though." There was a reminiscent laugh of mockery, but Gloria would only hold out her hand for the coat. "I'll put it on afterwards, if I need it. Good-bye, Freddie."

"Good-bye until Monday . . . Are you afraid I should kiss you when your arms were engaged?"

Gloria smiled with faint disfavour:

"I wonder why you say a thing like that. It's vulgar and not particularly new. You remember that you did try to kiss me once. It's true you apologized to me on your knees afterwards, but, as you know, I can never trust you."

"I remember. . . . You look astonishingly beautiful when you're angry, Gloria."

Without risking an answer, she hurried through the hall, too much irritated to care that Norman also was frowning with impatience.

"I can't make out why Kendaile lives here at all if he never has a good word to say for the place or the people," he murmured, as they drove away. "That everlasting superiority rather riles me."

"He was in a riling mood to-day. In some way he's managed to rile me, which I didn't think possible."

"What did he say?" Norman began. Then, as her silence turned to an appeal: "I'm hanged if I let Freddie Kendaile or any man on earth upset . . . my guests."

Gloria turned in surprise at the protective words and the possessive tone, though his timid ending disappointed her.

"I'm all right now, we needn't mind . . . what Freddie says," she whispered and started as her hand, resting idly on her knee, was caught and pressed in gratitude for the embracing plural.

She allowed her fingers to remain imprisoned in Norman's vigorous grip until the car turned in through the lodge-gates of Newbridge and drew up at the causeway.

"I'm afraid I shall be horribly late!" she warned him, looking in dismay from her watch to her knitted grey-silk skirt and buckskin shoes.

"But you're not going to change! I *beg* you. And the first duty of a guest is to do everything that her host asks."

His fingers played for an absorbed moment with the long tassel that hung from her cap down one cheek and gave her a touch of irresponsible gaiety and youth.

"Tell me what we're going to do this afternoon."

"This afternoon . . . Well, every one will have eaten a heavy meal; it's a hot day. . . . If we went off by ourselves . . . and finished looking round the place . . . The view from the tower . . . You don't want to lie down?"

"The first duty of a guest is to do everything that her host asks."

"But I don't want you to do it from a sense of duty."

Gloria's laughing eyes grew suddenly serious and looked away:

"Dear Norman, it's a pleasure, a joy for me to do anything for you. I tried to shew you that in hospital. That's why I couldn't bear it in your letters when you tried to thank me."

CHAPTER THREE

TWO ON A TOWER

MRS ERLYNNE : I lost one illusion last night. I thought I had no heart. I find I have, and a heart doesn't suit me. . . . It spoils one's career at critical moments.

—OSCAR WILDE : *Lady Windermere's Fan.*

I

THE lantern over the central hall at Newbridge ended in a flat roof thirty feet square, bordered by a three-foot stone parapet. North, south, east and west, the watch-tower commanded the country, under its summer haze, to a distant horizon of blue mountains ; near at hand the Severn glinted between its steep banks at every serpentine twist ; and the Welsh road, white as an old scar, stretched westward till it gathered itself to leap the river at the grey " new " bridge and ran out across a chain of low fields until it was lost in the tree-clad hills on the other side.

" ' Till the proud peak unfurled the flag o'er Darwin's rocky dales,
Till like volcanoes flared to heaven the stormy hills of Wales,
Till twelve fair counties saw the blaze on Malvern's lonely height,
Till streamed in crimson on the wind the Wrekin's crest of light ' . . . "

As he quoted the lines, Norman pointed with practised finger to the landmarks of the border. If Newbridge was the strategic key to the district, the lantern was the key to Newbridge. Far below, two stunted figures could be seen ambling along the sentry-walk by the side of the moat ; a flash of white revealed where a third pigmy was reading a paper ; all were too far away for their voices to be heard, and to those on the tower it was as though they had all England to themselves.

Disposing an armful of cushions on the stone floor, Norman joined Gloria where she stood leaning against the parapet, a

little out of breath from her climb and from the discovery that she was alone with him in that infinity of solitude and quiet.

"The heavenly peace!" she whispered, steadying herself with one bare arm twined round the standard of the lightning conductor and her other hand on her hip. She had taken off the silk coat; and her shoulders and back gleamed white and provocative through the film of her blouse. "And the security. Just as you said. Last night . . ."

"When you looked out of your window?" Norman asked.

"Did you see me?"

"I was thinking about you. I was . . . worried, Gloria. When you called yourself the perfect 'country-house girl' . . . I'm afraid you've not had a very comfortable life. I . . . want to talk to you."

Without turning her head, she held out one hand to him. Norman bent low to kiss it and drew her gently towards him. When they were face to face, her head drooped back until she was looking up at him dreamily, through half-closed lids, inviting him with her lips.

"Yes?"

"Gloria!"

"Darling Norman!"

He caught her to him and dragged her on to tip-toe, crushing her breathless while he kissed her lips and eyes. Her warm flesh throbbed with the beating of her heart, as she threw aside her paralysing restraint: at last she could give herself to him to love, to hurt; to use as he liked! As he loosened his grasp for fear of strangling her, she worked her arms free and flung them ecstatically about his neck. A melting weakness, stronger than the utmost force that she could use against him, possessed her and urged him to accept her surrender.

"My Gloria!"

"Don't let me go!"

Norman led her to the corner where he had spread his divan of cushions and sank on to his knees with his arms about her and her cheek pressed against his. When she moved, it was to nestle more securely against him; her quick breathing fanned his face; and her hair, breaking loose as the tasselled cap fell from her head, blew like a scented veil between them.

Into his eyes she could not yet look, for fear of revealing her shame at having ever schemed meanly to win him. Hiding in her room to make him miss her, using Freddie as a foil and

her father as a spur to pathos : it was unworthy, unnecessary, though it proved her need of him. He would understand if she explained. And henceforth she would be able to explain everything, to give up this life of pretending and striving. . . . With this strange light in his eyes, she wondered how she had failed to see his beauty and marvelled that she had ever calculated how much he could give her.

" My darling, I do love you ! "

Some day she must try to think when it began. At the hospital, where he seemed so lonely ? In that moment the day before when she felt his eyes devouring her ? But, hitherto, there had been base metal in their love : desire on his side and material greed on hers. Now she felt transfigured, no longer seeking for herself. Love . . . As she came to life again, instinct told her that nothing would ever equal that first love.

Little by little Gloria felt her heart beating less tumultuously; her eyes opened, and she raised her head :

" Norman ! "

With a shuddering sigh of contentment she knelt upright and stretched herself, then, with a smile, plunged again into his arms for a last embrace.

As she disengaged herself and scrambled to her feet, Norman picked up her cap and helped her to tidy the vagrant strands of her black hair. Both were bright-eyed, flushed and disordered ; her smile contained the hint of a vast, mysterious secret between them, but neither was willing to explore it in words. Unknown to himself, he was feeling, no doubt, that for years he had wanted to kiss some one and to be kissed with equal abandonment ; now that he had kissed her, he wanted to kiss her again ; and, as she stood with her back to him and her hands busied with her hair, he slipped his arms under hers and drew her to him. As she yielded unresistingly to his embrace and turned her head to him, he read in her smile that so she too, perhaps for years, had hungered to be kissed.

" My Norman ! "

" Gloria, Gloria, Gloria ! " he whispered.

She sighed again and unclasped his hands with tender reluctance :

" I must tidy myself ! And this time you're not to disarrange me the *moment* I'm beginning to look presentable. "

" Once more then ! "

He kissed her where her hair clustered low on her neck,

then released her. Far beneath them, the foreshortened figures had abandoned their slow perambulation of the sentry-walk, and he looked at his watch with sudden alarm; it was not yet half-past three, however, and he sat down on the divan until Gloria should be ready to join him. As she felt his eyes following hungrily the lithe movements of her supple body, an exultant pride in her own beauty flamed into life. Never before, she knew well, had he seen how white and shapely were her arms, how straight and slender her legs and ankles, how small her waist, how softly rounded her neck; never, till she lay with her heart beating against his, had he imagined such sweetness and warmth; never, until she turned and smiled down at him, had he guessed that her black eyes could hold such tender radiance. . . . If only she had more to give him!

"Will every one see?" he whispered.

"D'you mind if they do?"

Had she the voice to proclaim her love, the hills on all four sides should echo it!

"Our secret won't be our own when even one other person knows." He drew her on to his knees and held her with her cheek resting against his. "I don't understand it, I feel mad, drunk. . . . My God, why did I invite all these people?"

"What do *they* matter? I . . . only wish I felt sure your mother liked me."

"It doesn't matter whether she likes you or not. . . . We won't tell her till we can see our way clear. We won't call ourselves engaged. . . . Oh, Gloria, you *will* be patient, won't you? There's so much to talk about! I'm afraid the first few years . . . You mustn't go away with a false idea of the place: this week-end I'm living as we used to live in the old days, but I really can't afford it. It's only fair to tell you that." . . .

"Do you think it could make any difference?"

At the quiver of love in her voice he bent over her hands and kissed them:

"I hoped not . . . so far as I dared to hope anything. But, when you talk of the 'peace' and 'security' of Newbridge, well, I must warn you that there'll be years of cheese-paring. . . . Do you feel you could stand that? You're ready to wait?"

Norman felt a movement in her body; and her lips were pressed softly to his ear:

"Not too long! It's you I want, not Newbridge or money."

From the distance of the Melby Woods came the sound of a horn ; and they both scrambled to their feet. Norman's eager voice became clipped, nervous and matter-of-fact :

"The car's coming back ! We must go down."

2

For the next three hours he moved and spoke as in the first days when she met him in hospital a year earlier. Concussion of the brain had then expunged all memory of the bullet that had wounded him, of the attack in which he had been wounded, of everything since his last leave. Motes from a shattered dream danced enticingly before him and vanished as he tried to reach them ; the new surroundings—herself in their midst—he accepted mechanically as belonging to a world on the far side of a stream which he could never recross ; and from that land of oblivion there floated from time to time wraith-like figures pretending to have had some part in the last chapter of his life.

As mechanically now, Gloria watched him accepting the people and the circumstances of a party that had survived from a time before this new concussion. She marvelled that the others did not find him dazed, when he murmured vacuously :

"Just in time for tea. . . . Yes. Tea, of course. . .
Er, how did you all get on ? "

"Oh, we had a great match." . . .

He was rallying by the time that Mrs. May-Kingston reminded him of his promise to take her round the house, though he seemed to lose himself when Gloria was away from his side. As the party of exploration set out, he invited her to come too ; but Lady Cartwright was too quick for him :

"You can't want to see it all again. Stay here and talk to me, Miss Britton."

Overnight, Gloria fancied, she had been addressed by her Christian name. Finding herself suddenly isolated, she realized that battle was being offered before she had begun to prepare her defences.

"I should like to," she answered courteously ; "though I could see everything in this marvellous house again and again without being tired."

"Wait till you've been in this marvellous house a month ! I should have gone mad if I hadn't run away. So would you,

after the life you've led. Which brings me to my point : don't let Norman become too fond of you."

"Hadn't you better give that advice to him?" Gloria laughed. If she kept her tone light, she would afford her antagonist no opportunity for the scorching rudeness in which her temper found its escape. So long as she was not stampeded, she could prepare a case to shew that, in her own generation, she was no less worthy of Newbridge than Lady Cartwright had been in hers. "I shouldn't call him very . . . susceptible."

"If you don't lay yourself out to encourage him. . . . He's too obstinate, poor boy, to take advice from me."

Still smiling, Gloria recollected the previous day's discussion of Millicent Buckwell and pressed home Lady Cartwright's defeat :

"Perhaps he's too obstinate to be discouraged."

"Not if you shew him it's impossible."

"What's impossible?"

"Marriage."

"I've not said I'm going to marry him."

"You both think you are. Has he proposed?"

"No."

Lady Cartwright received the announcement without visible relief, as she had received Gloria's curt replies without open resentment :

"It's easier if there's nothing to undo."

"If we *were* engaged, you don't suppose either of us would . . . break it off, do you?"

Gloria had meant to say "allow *you* to break it off"; she despised herself for her faintness of heart.

"My dear, I'm prepared to find you fully as obstinate as he is," Lady Cartwright yawned. "But has he told you that he *can't* marry you unless he sells this place?"

"As he's not asked me to marry him, there was no reason why he should."

"He'll have to choose between you and Newbridge."

"If he chooses at all, I hope he'll choose the one he prefers."

Lady Cartwright's restless eyes, sweeping a library of unread books and forgotten portraits, became charged with hatred as she recalled the years of her own imprisonment :

"I've always wanted him to get out of this great barrack. We should be quite rich if he would; but he detests me for even suggesting it. . . . I *do* know something about this

absurd family: Newbridge comes first, and everything must yield to that. My child, if he sells it in a moment of infatuation, he'll detest you all his life."

"Then I hope he won't sell it. I shouldn't like to be detested by any one."

Lady Cartwright brought the interview to an end by unceremoniously opening a book; and Gloria escaped from the room, well satisfied that she had not given ground but very sure that the contest was only beginning. At dinner, Lady Cartwright concentrated her hostility on her son's departed guests, all of whom, she announced, had been dead for the last twenty years though they were too obstinate to confess it. Those who remained thereupon self-consciously set themselves to display their vitality and only desisted on being informed that they were all talking great nonsense, though doubtless they were too obstinate to realize it.

After dinner, Gloria was lured to the bridge-table by a voice that held more of command than of invitation:

"You had no chance yesterday, and I want to see whether you take after the admiral. He's a wicked man, but a beautiful player."

She was still securely fettered when the men came into the drawing-room; and, by the time that the last rubber had dragged its way through a grisly *post mortem* to an acrimonious bed of justice, Norman had retired to talk business with Mr. May-Kingston.

"You'll find him in the library, I expect," said Lady Cartwright provocatively.

"Oh, I shall see him in the morning," Gloria answered.

Alone in her room, she allowed herself a moment's bitterness at the thought that Norman was leaving her to fight alone. He had never even looked her way at dinner; when she needed him most, he was far more interested in old May-Kingston's devastated areas and the fall of the mark. Business; money; the means to keep up Newbridge. By comparison with Newbridge, everything was unimportant . . . as Lady Cartwright had warned her.

Perhaps she had warned him, too.

Gloria parted her curtains and looked down on the library windows. Dark, . . . as she had almost expected. So he had only hidden himself to avoid saying good-night to her. She ought never to have let him kiss her that afternoon; he was no longer troubling about kisses that came so easily; she should have kept her head till he was abject with longing. Now the longing was all on her side, blinding her and so shattering her pride that, if there had been one glimmer of light in those inexorable windows, she would have made an excuse to seek him out.

To-morrow, thank Heaven, she was going to Melby, where the Kendailles would make a fuss of her, where Norman would miss her. But being missed was no good to *her*; and, if he could let her steal miserably away without saying good-night, he might let her stay away. Lady Cartwright, meanwhile, would harp on Newbridge and Millicent Buckwell till she hypnotized him into thinking that he could only keep the one by marrying the other. If Norman ever married any other woman . . .

In Paris, Gloria knew, girls would sometimes throw vitriol in the face of the men who jilted them; but, to any one with a spark of pride, it was a question whether you were humiliated more by forcing yourself on a man who did not want you or by shewing the world that any man could hurt you. All very fine till you applied it to yourself!

"If I ever saw another woman kissing Norman, I'd . . . sew her lips up!"

For all her bloodthirsty thoughts Gloria found herself gently crying. Perhaps, instead of missing her, he would learn that he could live quite comfortably without her. And then? After Melby, she must put in a day or two at Carlton House Chambers before going to Stratton Park. "And when Dot turns me out? 'Gloria darling, I have to go up on Tuesday; would it amuse you to motor up with me?'" After Stratton Park there would be Carlton House Chambers again, with the admiral and Mr. Jorley to aid her in making something clean and great of her life; Carlton House Chambers and Melby Court, Carlton House Chambers and Abergeldy Castle, Stratton Park and Carlton House Chambers once again.

The silence of Newbridge, heretofore mistaken for secure peace, forbade her even to cry, unless she buried her face in the pillows. She might be as wretched as she pleased so long as she made no noise about it! As lonely, as hungry, as frightened . .

Gloria stifled a scream as the sound of scratching by the door filled her with new terror that there was a rat in her room; she had then to force down a peal of hysterical laughter as a spill of white paper shot over the polished boards:

"Sweetheart, I tried all the evening to get a moment with you and now I've let you slip away without offering you my blessing. Don't allow yourself to be worried by anything that anybody may say to you. We must have a glorious last talk to-morrow when the others have gone. How I wish it weren't the last! Good-night and God bless you."

As she came to the end, a sob escaped her, to be answered immediately by a cautious whistle from the passage. Opening the door, she found Norman standing with one finger to his lips, clutching his shoes with the other hand. Though the sudden rush of light dazzled him, his gaze turned from her own red eyes to the handkerchief which she had forgotten to hide.

"I couldn't have slept if I hadn't said good-night," he began. "Why, what have you been crying about?"

"Norman! Oh, my dear, I want to talk to you!" she whispered excitedly.

"Not now! We shall rouse the house."

"Not if we shut the door."

"But I mustn't come into your room!"

Gloria looked at him in surprise. The museum manner was more than skin-deep.

"Well . . . take me where I *can* talk. You must. I'm frantic. Your mother says I'm spoiling your life; she hates me . . ."

"I told you in my note not to mind what *anybody* says; this is *our* affair, Gloria. That is why I said we mustn't tell any one; if my mother asks whether we're engaged, I want to be able to say truthfully that we're not. Otherwise . . . I hate attacking her, but, when she's stirred up, she says things that she doesn't mean; I remember the way she tried to put the blame on my father when she became bored with living here."

The steadiness of his voice comforted her but could not give her back the old security:

"She says you can't live here if you marry me and that's all you care about."

"And you paid us both the compliment of believing that I should throw you over?" The whisper of good-humoured banter miscarried; and she tugged fretfully at the crumpled

handkerchief. "What a child you are, Gloria! And what a fairy's child you look with your little white wings. Turn round, sweetheart, so that I can see; I've not had a glimpse of you the whole evening."

Gloria stood for a moment as though she had not heard him; then the handkerchief fluttered to the ground and she threw her arms round his neck and clung to him:

"Don't leave me, Norman! I'm frightened!"

"You're only tired and upset, darling. And your poor shoulders are like ice. Kiss me good-night and hop into bed . . ."

"No, stay with me! I'm not frightened when you're here. Stay with me! I want you."

"My dear, I *can't*! . . . Be brave, Gloria; there's nothing to frighten you."

He unclasped her hands, but she would not move; with a whispered "good-night" he turned and walked on tip-toe down the passage. At the end he looked back; and she was still standing in the open door-way with both hands pressed to her eyes and the light shining on her white arms and black hair. He saw her bend down and pick up the fallen handkerchief. When the door was closed, she tore his note into small pieces and set fire to them with her candle, wondering with bowed head what meaning he must read into her distraught prayer that he should not leave her.

If Lady Cartwright set herself next day to prevent Norman's meeting Gloria privately, she was warmly seconded by Gloria herself, who awoke with a feeling that she would like to remain hidden in her room until dragged out by force. When Norman announced his intention of driving her over to Melby, she enjoyed a moment's elation at this one act of defiance; but, when she came into a hall filled with silent, curious watchers, she was thankful to be shielded by a veil.

"We must meet as soon as you're back in London," Norman told her. "I shan't be able to get away for a bit, as I have to arrange about the cottage-hospital *fête*: we lend Newbridge for that every year. When that's finished, I'm going up to talk business with May-Kingston." . . .

"Shall I . . . see you while I'm here?" asked Gloria at the lodge-gates of Melby.

"I'm afraid not, . . . unless there's anything you want," he answered in a tone that left no room for appeal.

As the car drove away, Gloria had to fight down an impulse to run after it. With his cottage-hospitals and his meetings in London, Norman had not told her when she would see him

again; he had said nothing about writing; and he had stood apart as though he feared she would embrace him in front of the chauffeur. Though she knew him to be undemonstrative, his brief moments of tenderness set her nerves tingling and then passed away before she could assure herself of his love. With Lady Cartwright plotting behind her back and Freddie Kendaille digging a pit before her feet, Gloria needed reassurance.

"One thing: I shan't give myself away by seeming indecently happy," she decided, as the footman led her to the long saloon where Freddie was awaiting her at the piano.

4

On the terrace, a tea-table had been laid for two; and he apologized, as they shook hands, for the smallness of his party.

"It's only ourselves and the Dropfords. They're changing, at the moment, for tennis," he explained. "My venerable parents are in the garden somewhere. Before you go up, Gloria, I have a present for you."

Leading her to the light of the window, he produced from his pocket a square of tissue-paper and pink ribbon; inside, Gloria found a set of four sapphire-and-diamond slave-bangles. Love of beauty, stronger than the frigid caution which she had intended to preserve, made her eyes shine, as she flashed the bracelets in the sun; though, when Freddie smiled—with his affectation of omniscience—at her quick response, she retained enough control of herself to hand them back:

"They're *divine*! But I'm afraid it's a present I can't accept."

"Why not?"

"I despise people who go through life taking and taking when they *can't* give anything in return," Gloria explained loftily.

Then she paused to wonder whether this sudden change of front would betray her.

"I accept my rebuke," he answered. "Whether *I* get any pleasure from giving them you . . . Perhaps you're right." He tossed the bangles on to a table behind him; one fell to the floor and rolled under a sofa, but he let it lie and stared out of window with his hands in his pockets. "What d'you feel about tennis? The sun's off the court now."

There was no answer for a moment, as Gloria was on her knees by the sofa, searching for the missing bangle.

"I should like to play," she answered in a voice muffled

from bending. "But I'm not going to let you quarrel with me, Freddie. If I say it's not *right* for me . . ."

"Some people like giving things. You never *used* to mind. Of course, if you've decided that the time's come to change all that . . ."

Gloria stood up and slipped the bangles over one hand:

"There! And thank you a thousand times! I've given in. I'm sorry if I seemed ungracious; will you, in return, promise me not to do it again?"

As he watched her in silence, Gloria fancied that he seemed surprised to find how quickly her resistance had collapsed.

"I should only break my promise," he laughed. "And then we should have this scene all over again."

The desire to please him passed as rapidly as it had come.

"And who'd be sorry first?" Gloria taunted.

"Ah, this time you might find I'd learnt wisdom," Freddie answered enigmatically. "As I've told you before, you *don't* appreciate me."

Though she left him to enjoy the last word, Gloria felt worsted. Wandering from her favourite bedroom to the boudoir on one side and the bathroom on the other, she felt for the first time that the scents and bath-salts, the flowers on every table, even the pleasantly smiling young maid on her knees by the open trunk were so many insidious attempts to sap her independence. So long as the old Kendailles hoped to buy her for their son, she must expect this kind of attack; but, now that she was pledged in spirit to Norman, it was more than ever necessary to escape the net of obligations in which they all combined to entangle her. As she ran down to the court, Gloria slashed her racquet in the air with strokes that sang the defeat of every possible opponent.

To her delight, she found herself pitted against the preposterous woman who was supposed to have fascinated Freddie. It would be a rare triumph to run him off his feet; a fine revenge to shew them all how much charm a plump, soft woman of thirty-five retained when she was disordered and out of breath.

"Anything on the game?" Mrs. Dropford enquired.

"Play you a quid a sett, Freddie," drawled Rex.

"I can't afford that, but I'll play you half-a-crown a sett," Gloria proposed.

"Done!" Freddie answered. "Love all! Play!"

For two hours the calm of late afternoon was only broken by the patter of rope soles, by the sing of the racquets in the air and by the rasp of the ball as it struck spinning on the gritty surface of the court. The men were evenly matched; and, if

Rex Dropford hit wildly under the steady pressure of his opponents, Gloria settled to her game and gradually redressed the balance; in service and in net-play, in lobbing and in a diagonal fore-hand drive across the net, she outdistanced Mrs. Dropford and gave Freddie no rest. Mrs. Kendaille looked on for a few minutes, retiring when the fire of the sunset cooled to orange and her husband's attendant wheeled him back to the house. The dressing-gong boomed distantly through the still air without reaching the notice of the players. Only when the light became deceptive did they think of stopping.

"We're three sets all; let's call this the last," Freddie suggested.

"I'm coming up to the net this time," announced Gloria.

"You'll be slain if you do," he prophesied, in surprised amusement at the gleam of excitement in her black eyes.

"You can't frighten me, Freddie."

Though her reach was too short for effective control of the court, Gloria smashed two easy returns and kept her adversaries back on the service-line. As the Dropfords were now equally exhausted, the match became a trial of endurance and skill between Freddie and herself; game answered game, each a long-drawn deuce-'vantage, until the score stood at five-all.

"Sudden death?" Rex panted. "It's your serve, Freddie."

"Unless you like to call it a draw? I can hardly see."

"No! Sudden death, and we'll beat you!" cried Gloria.

"You've won every serve so far, and it's time you lost one."

"I shan't lose this," he laughed.

"If you like, I'll have a pound with you."

"Done! Play, Rex. . . . Fifteen."

"I'll make it two pounds," Gloria called, as she ran back and stood, bent double, six feet behind the service-line.

"As you will. Play. . . . Thirty."

"Shall we make it five pounds?" Gloria proposed impudently, as she came to the net.

"By all means . . . Forty. . . . Do you want any more?"

"Oh, ten as a guarantee of good faith. A good game to win, partner! . . . All right, I'm ready." . . . A screwing back-hander forced the ball over without an inch to spare by the side-line. "I don't call that much of a serve. Forty-fifteen. Now, if my partner doesn't let me down . . ."

"Any advance on ten pounds?" Freddie interrupted.

"Twenty!" said Gloria gaily. "Now carefully, partner; my worldly wealth depends on you . . . Let! And a fault. *And another!!* Forty-thirty. They're getting rattled!"

"I didn't want to win a love game," Freddie called back in explanation. "Will you double your stakes? Right! That's forty. Play!"

Gloria slammed a fault contemptuously over the containing wire:

"One more, please. The ball has to come *in* the court . . . And *over* the net. Deuce! I'll double you again, Freddie."

"That's . . . eighty pounds. . . . I wish I had *some* idea where the line was. Play. 'Vantage-in . . . Play, Gloria!"

"Have we doubled again? Whew! That's a hundred and sixty. . . . Right." A second back-hander slashed the ball back within a foot of where the first had dropped. "Deuce once more. You don't seem to like those returns of mine, Freddie. . . . Now, partner . . . What's twice a hundred and sixty? Heavens above! Three hundred and twenty?"

Freddie threw the ball into the air and caught it again without serving.

"I don't think I should redouble any more, if I were you," he advised her.

"Are you afraid? We've run you up from forty-love."

"I don't mind. Play! . . . How was it? Fault? And another. . . . I can't see a thing."

"That's 'vantage-out,'" cried Gloria. "Three hundred and twenty; and this time it'll be six hundred and forty. I *hope* I get it over! Would you like double or quits on the game?"

"As you like. Play!"

"That's twelve hundred and eighty, if we win. . . . And a fault," she shrieked, bending aside to let the ball pass. Instantly resuming her former position, she crouched like an animal waiting to spring. Her whole body was quivering; and Rex, at the net, could hear her panting with excitement. "You *will* be careful this time, Freddie, won't you? *And another!!!* Game and sett!"

"Twelve hundred and eighty, you said?" asked Freddie imperturbably.

5

With the sudden slackening of strain, a deep silence fell upon the court. While Gloria fanned herself furiously, Mrs. Dropford wrapped her handkerchief round a blistered finger. The quiet, matter-of-fact voice of their host cut through the silence; and, in the moment before they assembled from their corners, Rex reviewed the early games and looked in perplexity at his wife.

"Just as well we won," he murmured. "My partner would have looked a little blue if she'd had to pay up."

"Freddie was serving faults on purpose," Mrs. Dropford answered irritably. "He oughtn't to encourage her."

At the back of the court Freddie was whistling to himself as he collected the balls.

"Come along, Gloria!" he called out. "We're hours late for dinner. . . . It was a great match; to-morrow you must give us our revenge."

At the sound of her name, Gloria started from her reverie. For ten minutes she had been dead to every emotion but a frantic need for victory; as a revenge for three years of drawn battles, she *must* win, she would will the ball to go where she liked. Doubling and redoubling . . . Reckless and shrill . . . With dry mouth and burning eyes . . .

Now that it was all over, she could stand aside and see what an exhibition she had made of herself. It was an attack of gambling fever; and, as the word crossed her mind, she saw a blazing room with long tables and a row of bent backs, craning heads; avid eyes were devouring the white face of the man beside her, and she recognized her own father, pressing tremulous fingers on a top-heavy pile of notes and gold. . . .

"Glor-i-a!"

The blazing room vanished; and she collected herself with a deliberation that strove to hide an undefined fear. If she had lost whatever the sum was that Freddie had just called out . . .

"I wasn't *serious* about the bet," she explained, as she hurried to join the others. "That was just to cramp your style."

"You won all right," Freddie answered.

"But I'm not going to *take* it! Thirteen hundred pounds, nearly . . ."

"I've lost *and* won more than that in the course of my mis-spent youth," he replied, as he slipped his arms into the sleeves of a white blanket-coat. "Why did you go on raising me if you didn't mean it?"

"I don't know. Madness, if you like. But I won't take a penny."

"Well . . . I shan't force you if you don't want it . . . Put on your coat, Gloria, and come up to the house; I want a drink."

The sudden softening of his voice reacted on Gloria, and they hurried up to the house, arm-in-arm. For the first time since leaving Abergeldy, she felt dispensed from playing a part. At the end of one cocktail, Freddie offered her a second; and the

little lines about his eyes puckered in a smile as she nodded her assent. The irresponsibility spread to Rex Dropford and expressed itself in ponderous pleasantries, of which the outline was blunted by a giggling delivery. Alone of the four, his wife remained contemptuous and cold ; and, when the others dragged themselves from their chairs and went up to dress, she took Freddie aside and administered an ill-tempered lecture :

" It's no business of mine ; but, when a girl *says* she can only afford to play half-a-crown a sett, . . . you oughtn't to tempt her. And you oughtn't to have given her that second cocktail. There's a gambler and a drunkard on one side and a cocotte on the other." . . .

" Gloria would be amused to know that you thought I was imperilling her soul," Freddie laughed.

" Oh, you may think it very funny to try experiments on these young fools, but you may have a lot to answer for."

On the way to her room, Mrs. Dropford paused at Gloria's door. On the plea of giving Gloria a womanly warning against a predatory man, it would be pleasant to shew her that she *was* a young fool.

" Miss Britton ? " she called, after two ineffectual taps.

" I'm just going to have my bath," answered a distant voice.

" Do you want me ? "

" Oh, no. . . . If you haven't brought a maid," improvised Mrs. Dropford, " I was wondering if mine could help you."

" Oh, thanks so much ! Mrs. Kendaile has already lent me one."

Gloria listened to the departing footsteps and then crept guiltily into the bathroom. The two cocktails had clouded her brain till she could make no guess why Elfie Dropford wanted to see her : the offer of the maid was clearly a blind ; they had nothing in common but the dubious honour of Freddie's affection ; and, now that she had proved her independence of him, Gloria wished joy of it to any one who could capture it.

" All the same, if my lady wants a quarrel, she shall have it," Gloria whispered to a nosegay of white carnations.

It was a fair assumption that Freddie had sent no flowers to Mrs. Dropford ; and this latest of a thousand tiny tributes revived Gloria's old hunger for personal ascendancy. The maid who was dressing her powdered her white skin and handled her gleaming black hair with the reverence of an artist in the presence of a masterpiece. Mrs. Kendaile sent a message that Gloria was not to hurry, which could only mean that the others were all waiting for her. And Freddie's slave-bangles lay on her dressing-

table between Freddie's platinum wrist-watch and Freddie's onyx cigarette-case.

Throughout dinner, Mrs. Kendaille plied her with food ; her husband broke startlingly through his customary silence to order her glass to be refilled ; and, when they went into the drawing-room, Rex and Freddie simultaneously begged her to sing.

" I've brought no music with me," Gloria sighed, as her gaze travelled complacently round the room and rested for a moment on her rival, who was standing alone by a table covered with illustrated papers. " If you like, I'll give you some imitations, though," she added, as Elsie Dropford made a move towards the piano. " ' Study of a lady who has been caught in a storm and gets shelter by looking over a house she has no intention of taking.' You haven't seen that, Freddie. Or would you like ' The tactful hostess and the man who arrives for dinner on the wrong night ' ? "

For nearly an hour she held them weak with laughter ; and the applause of an audience as irresponsible as herself reacted on her till she began for the first time to enjoy these impersonations which as a rule had to be wrung from her.

" Gad, you know, you ought to be on the stage," Rex cried enthusiastically.

Freddie kicked him surreptitiously to prevent further reference to the actress blood in Gloria's veins and jumped up to assist in an unrehearsed duologue.

" ' New arrival being shewn round Newbridge by the proud owner,' " he proposed. " I'll be the guest, you be Norman. Now then ! ' My *dear* Sir Norman, what a lovely place you have here ! ' "

" It's some one else's turn now," answered Gloria with a look of contemptuous challenge in the direction of Mrs. Dropford.

As she walked away to the open window, a gently mischievous voice at her side murmured :

" You don't like being teased about Norman ? "

" When you've just this moment come from a man's house, I think it's rather disloyal to make fun of him," she answered indifferently. " And I don't think you should sneer at Norman till you've better grounds for sneering."

" I've never sneered at him in my life ! " The sleepy smile that for a moment had almost masked the watchfulness of Freddie's eyes faded in compliment to her gravity. " I'm . . . sorry for him. The one thing he cares about is Newbridge ; and, if he tries to live there, it will be as his own caretaker."

When she contrasted Norman's exalted sense of duty with

Freddie's cynical indolence, Gloria found this tone of detached complacency exasperating.

"We can't all have rich fathers," she murmured.

"I wish we could! I laugh at Norman, because he's sometimes a bit solemn; but if I could give him a leg-up . . . I've been wondering whether my father or I can do anything for him through the bank. . . . It'll come better from you than from me, because he never takes me seriously; but, as you're quite obviously in love with each other, he's bound to believe whatever you tell him. . . . You've nothing to drink!"

Though he vanished from her side before she could answer, Gloria waited only until she had recovered from her surprise and then followed him to the alcove where he was busying himself with syphons and decanters.

"Freddie, I'm not sure that I quite understand. . . ," she began.

"No? You never *would* believe that I cared for you! It can't be for want of being told, Gloria."

"But, Freddie . . . Oh, you know, that spoilt it! When I thought you were being really generous, I find it's only another . . . trick!"

A whimsical sigh escaped him as he filled his own tumbler:

"Is that a very pretty word? I'm not wholly blind, Gloria. You can't marry Norman unless he sells Newbridge; I suggest something that may help a little. . . . Whoever else may gain by the 'trick', I certainly can't. . . . If you'll excuse me, I must help my father up to bed." . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

MELBY COURT

"Fortune sells many things to the hasty which she gives to the slow."
—BACON: *Advancement of Learning.*

I

As Freddie disappeared through one door, Gloria murmured a hasty good-night to the Dropfords and hurried through another. If she left him again to enjoy the last word, it was for fear of snapping under the tension of the last six hours.

"I don't know why being in love should make you entirely mad," she confided to the reflection in her mirror. "I can't do right to-day."

A vision of the slave-bangle controversy jostled one of her insane performance on the tennis-court; and the picture of her father at the mercy of a gambling-fever was succeeded by one of herself, agonizing to impress and outshine her company. With the same alternating truculence and charm, the same mingled brilliance and buffoonery, she had so often seen the admiral making sport for his audience until some friend less callous than the rest bundled him off to bed. That night his spirit must have stood at her elbow. Though she seemed unaffected in appearance, she could remember drinking two cocktails and several glasses of champagne; there might also have been some port or a liqueur, but she did not want to recall it.

"Nice for me if the Dropford woman says I was *drunk*. . . . Or if I have to tell Freddie I didn't know what I was saying. . . . I must put myself right with *him*."

Three unsuccessful drafts only convinced Gloria that any letter, if it did not betray her secret, must at least provide Freddie with ammunition for his attack next day. And it would be easier to explain herself by word of mouth. Something was wrong with the atmosphere of the house . . . or the people.

They were all living at too close quarters ; there was too much expectancy in the air. Whenever she had been to Melby Court before, there had always been a big party ; but the Dropfords were a curious number and a more curious choice, too many or too few. . . .

"She's a Juggernaut, that woman. I hated her from the moment she came into the hall at Newbridge. Overdressed . . . late . . . as if she owned the place . . . and Freddie into the bargain. I expect she hates me just as much, which is one good thing. Probably she tried to make him put me off ; and he refused. Hence her vile temper all the evening."

The delight of self-congratulation became blunted as Gloria reconstructed the imaginary scene. In one of their latest wrangles, Freddie had warned her that he might have learned wisdom by now. If he had said : "My dear Elfie, I can get rid of her quite diplomatically. She would marry Norman Cartwright *to-morrow*, if he could afford to keep a wife at Newbridge. I can arrange that." . . . Gloria flooded the room with light and sprang out of bed to make sure that she had torn her letters so small that they could not be pieced together.

"Freddie's a man I shouldn't believe, even if I knew he was telling the truth," she whispered between shut teeth.

Then she was glad to plunge herself in darkness again, for the sight of the spacious room, fragrant with the roses that Mrs. Kendaille had cut for her, was insupportable at a time when Freddie was conducting a lone-handed intrigue to bribe or drive her out of the house.

Next morning, when she discovered him on the terrace after breakfast, Gloria let fall a colourless phrase of regret for a possible misunderstanding :

"If you really meant what you said, I think it's very handsome of you. It would be sad if Norman had to sell Newbridge. . . . Why you should want to do this . . ."

She broke off with a shrug and tried to disguise her embarrassment by lighting a cigarette.

"But I told you," answered Freddie with a grave smile. "I want, more than anything in the world, to see you properly established, Gloria ; and, if I mayn't do it directly, let me hand on the job to somebody more acceptable."

"That's very sweet of you, but . . . aren't you being a little premature ?"

"You know that better than I do. But, if nothing comes of it, no one's harmed. I should have *liked* to do it direct . . . but if I'm not acceptable . . ."

His trick of repeating such a word engaged Gloria's attention and revived her vanishing suspicions.

"That *sounds* rather as if you were washing your hands of me," she complained.

"No, I didn't mean that." Freddie crossed his legs and sank lower into his chair, looking away over the tips of his fingers at the lawns sloping down to the forest belt. "It's so hard to talk to you, Gloria, because you think *everything's* a trick. . . . Don't apologize! It's my fault for trying so desperately hard to win you. Rightly or wrongly, I believe I know you better than any one else: your life, your history, your moods and temperament. Things wouldn't always be easy between us, but I could make a success where most other men would fail. Of course, if you've decided not to give me the chance, there's nothing more to be said; and I saw last night that you'd made up your mind to marry Norman. I don't know what stage you've reached; but I wish I could feel more comfortable about it. I'm wondering whether you can live up to Norman." . . . Gloria turned her head as Freddie jumped up and fetched a chair for Mrs. Dropford who was coming along the terrace with a racquet in her hand. "This is disinterested," he added in conclusion, "because I'm out of the running."

After a sleepless night of imaginary pitched battles and victorious speeches, Gloria found herself tongue-tied in the presence of the two people who had been plotting her expulsion. When Mrs. Dropford suggested a knock-up before luncheon, Gloria hurried in search of her racquet with the docility of a child; though she felt Freddie's eyes following her, she dared not linger to hear what he was saying about her; and, when Mrs. Kendaile drifted into her room to discuss plans for the following week, Gloria interrupted, with a voice that seemed not to be her own, that she had to rejoin her father immediately in London.

The news could hardly have evoked greater consternation if she had coupled it with a report of Freddie's elopement, though the consternation restored something of her own self-confidence.

"You must spare us a *few* days. . . ," Mrs. Kendaile implored.

"I'm afraid it's not possible," Gloria interrupted. "You *know* Freddie's asked me to marry him . . . *more* than once. I like him enormously, he's been wonderfully good to me, but I'm not in love with him. That makes it so difficult . . ."

"But in *time* . . ." Mrs. Kendaile pleaded tremulously.

"I shall never change. As I told him, I began wrong by not taking him seriously. He'd flirted with so *many* people . . ."

The old woman's eye-lids flickered, as though the guilty secret of a life-time were being shouted at street-corners.

"With his looks . . . and his money . . ." she began. Then her shoulders bent patiently. "I *ought* to have checked him, I suppose, but the men of this family weren't intended by nature to live as monks. I married one Kendaille . . . and gave birth to three. Yet I would sooner see Freddie darting from one indiscretion to another than marrying one of them. . . . You may be sure, my dear, I didn't *like* seeing the bloom brushed off him, but at least he does know now what he wants. You, I daresay, are rather frightened by the idea of marrying a man with . . . sealed chapters in his life." . . .

"I could never *share* my husband," interrupted Gloria with decision.

"You wouldn't . . . *now*. Freddie is nearly forty; he's reached an age when he would like to have children. And I—we—John and I have reached an age when we should be thankful to see him settling down with some one we loved." . . . As Gloria continued obdurate, disappointment darkened Mrs. Kendaille's sombre eyes. "You shall do whatever you think best, my dear." . . .

"Let me come again when he and I can meet . . . just as friends," Gloria begged.

2

Whether any part of their conversation was reported Gloria had no means of knowing until she escaped that night to her bedroom. As she undressed, the unexpected sound of Freddie's voice in the passage quickened the beating of her heart:

"Gloria? Not asleep yet, I hope? I saw the light under your door. I say, I'm so sorry to hear you're leaving us to-morrow."

"I feel I ought to see father before he goes away," she called back.

"If you must, you must. I came to find out what train you were going by, so that I could give orders about a car. If you're thinking of the eleven-five, I'll have some lunch packed up for you. It's not a very good train, though. If you'll let me have Bradshaw, I'll see if I can't find you something better."

As she threw a wrap round her shoulders and unlocked the door, Gloria recognized bitterly that this was the first and only suggestion that Freddie cared whether he saw her or not.

"I wish I hadn't to go," she sighed, with a furious desire to stay and make herself indispensable to him.

"I have an idea there's a nine-fifty something," he murmured absently, turning the pages without looking at her. "I don't want to drive you out any earlier, of course. . . . My mother tells me that she had a talk with you this afternoon," he added, raising the book nearer to his eyes and tracing his way down the page with deliberate forefinger. "Nine-fifty-seven, it is."

"Yes. . . . She rather upset me. And yet I've always been quite frank with you, haven't I, Freddie?"

"Are you engaged to Norman?" he demanded abruptly.

"No. I think I told you that before."

"Then . . . I was wondering why you felt it necessary to run away. Are you coming back?"

"If I'm asked," she replied, unconsciously borrowing his own tartness of tone.

"How will things be different or easier?"

"I won't come if you don't want me to. . . . Freddie, are you dismissing me?"

"My dear, don't be absurd!" he laughed. "We've not quarrelled!"

Though he might skate round the idea of "dismissal", he would not deny the fact; and Gloria felt that she would stop at no sacrifice if she could ride out instead of being driven out at his convenience and Elfie Dropford's bidding:

"Shall I see you at the St. Johns' this week-end?"

"No, I don't think I shall go there."

"Because of me? If I ask you to come?"

"You wouldn't like to make me disobliging."

"If I begged you humbly?"

He would only laugh; and, though Gloria had been schooling herself to do without him, she was not yet braced for the shock of finding that he had broken free of her domination.

"I hope I shall find you there," she said softly. "It will make an enormous difference to me. I *dread* Dot St. John's parties."

"Oh, I like them. I shall certainly go there some time this summer."

"Then you *are* staying away to avoid me! Freddie, if I don't meet you at Stratton this week-end, I shall know it's all over."

"And then?"

So cool an acceptance of her ultimatum roused her to greater recklessness than she had intended:

"I shall never speak to you again. If that's all my friendship means to you . . ."

"My dear, has it occurred to you that I shall still have visitors in the house?"

"That's only an excuse!" she cried, as she urged him through the door and locked it noisily behind him.

On reaching Carlton House Chambers Gloria found the telegram in which she had announced her return lying unopened on the dining-room table. On every hand there was a disorder unusual even in her father's easy-going life; and for five furious minutes she stood staring at a scene of grimy windows that should have been opened, vases that should have been emptied and letters that should have been forwarded.

"It is a pig-sty! Dot's quite right!" she cried, pulling savagely at the bell. "If *Norman* knew the way we lived . . . I wonder I come out of it as well as I do." Memory, slipping out of control, presented her with a picture of herself making sport for the Kendailles and Dropfords, of herself again on the tennis-court at Melby, finally of herself on the watch-tower at Newbridge with Norman's arms about her, crushing her to his bosom. "I wonder if I *do* come out of it so very well. If I ever let myself go, I should become just like father . . . And it's a bore always having to keep a curb on yourself." . . .

Mr. Jorley, ill-pleased at having his mid-day rest interrupted, informed her that the admiral was away indefinitely. His "Youlaloi", tuned to a minor key, became reproachful at the suggestion that a meal should be made ready. Glad of an excuse to escape into cleaner surroundings, Gloria collected her letters and walked out to the Ritz, where, among her many friends, she could always be sure of finding one who would ask her to join his party.

"Back on the tread-mill," she whispered bitterly, as she scrutinized the crowded lounge.

Then pride in her own popularity asserted itself as Mrs. St. John darted forward from a straggling group:

"Gloria! I thought you were still in the country! Lunch with me and tell me all your news! I met Mary Cartwright in Bond Street." . . .

She paused invitingly, and Gloria squeezed her arm:

"Dot dear, I'll tell you everything, but I don't feel very much like being teased. I *hope* . . . But it's all a bit muddly and difficult at present."

If Mrs. St. John was incapable of deep sympathy, at least her curiosity kept her silent while Gloria described the events and

emotions of the last ten days. From time to time a cautious "This is all in dead secrecy" was answered by an encouraging nod; but, in the relief of talking openly, Gloria soon ceased to care whether her confidence was betrayed.

"I *do* believe it's the real thing," commented Mrs. St. John, after a critical study of the girl's shining eyes. Though she no longer took credit for the matches she contrived, a love-affair—even when not illicit—was exciting. "I hope it comes off, . . . though Mary can be a perfect fury when she likes." Her curiosity satisfied in one direction, she turned it loose in another. "What did you make of Elfie Dropford?"

"Is Freddie supposed to be in love with her?" asked Gloria indifferently.

"So every one tells me. I knew he was in love with a married woman, but I've only just heard her name."

"There was no sign of anything at Melby."

"Ah, Freddie's too great an artist to strike a wrong note. And it would amuse him to have the husband there the whole time."

"I should have thought he might have been rather an obstacle," Gloria suggested with an instinctive shielding movement of self-defence.

"Obstacles of that kind can usually be removed . . . for a consideration. They have their passage paid to . . . Valparaiso."

"Does Elfie want to get rid of him too?"

Mrs. St. John smiled maliciously, as she scrawled her name at the foot of the bill:

"Oh, no! She'll write and *beg* him to come back. And he'll refuse. And her letter will be read in court."

As they walked out of the restaurant, Gloria saw a man bowing to her; and her heart seemed first to stop and then to race as Norman jumped up from the table where he was sitting with Mr. May-Kingston.

"You're not leaving this moment?" he asked. "I'm only up for a few hours. Can't I meet you outside?"

"I shall be here for a few minutes," Gloria conceded, with a polite indifference that matched his own, though it did not seem to impose on Mr. May-Kingston.

Ten minutes later, Norman carried her away to talk undisturbed in the Green Park.

"This is the most heavenly luck!" he exclaimed. "I can hardly believe it. . . . First of all May-Kingston, then you . . ."

"Is he going to do anything for you," interrupted Gloria.

"If I'm any good. Of course, it'll take him two or three years to say what I'm fit for." . . .

"Freddie Kendaile was suggesting that you should have a talk with his father." . . .

"I'm afraid I've even less claim on him than on May-Kingston."

"Freddie *wants* to help you. He told me so. If you're going to the St. Johns' this week-end . . ."

"I shan't be able to manage it. There's such a terrible lot to do at Newbridge."

Gloria hesitated till she had mastered her disappointment. Any other man would have thrown everything aside for the chance of being with the woman he loved.

"I really believe your mother's right," she laughed. "If you had to decide between Newbridge and me . . ."

"When you've been badgered to sell it," Norman answered between clenched teeth; "when every wandering Jew thinks you'll be thankful to let it him for five years . . . If this May-Kingston business comes off, the place is *safe*!"

"And how soon . . ." She blushed hotly as her passionate need for him betrayed itself. "How soon will this appointment be settled?"

"I expect he'll want me for a year or two on trial."

At the end of an hour's conversation, Gloria returned home with the feeling that she wholly failed to understand the man whom she was going to marry.

"Would you like me to take any message to Freddie?" she asked.

"Are you going back to Melby?"

"No. . . . Freddie will come to Stratton this week-end," Gloria replied with purposeful deliberation.

3

"Freddie will come to Stratton this week-end," she repeated two days later, after looking for him in vain at Waterloo. "I wonder who else will be there." . . .

From the early nineties, when week-end parties were as new and remorseless as Mrs. St. John's passion for surrounding herself with ephemeral celebrities, her house near Basingstoke had been a court of final appeal for all those faltering hostesses who could not decide for themselves whether an author, a politician or an actor was worth knowing and worthy to be known. The doubtful newcomer, when once he had been bidden to Sunday luncheon at Stratton Park, could be accepted and handed on without fear until his passport lapsed or was rescinded.

The St. John hall-mark, in a different metaphor, was no more easily to be bought by the undeserving than escaped by the deserving. From time to time an independent spirit would refuse to be drawn into parties where he kept unwelcome hours and played unwanted games; but, if Mrs. Dot had marked him down for conquest, his obstinate boasts and arrogant wagers were usually unavailing. Unless he lived abroad, his name would sooner or later be detected in the great visitors' book that took the place of a Victorian album and was in eager demand, of a Monday morning, when the bewildered guests tried belatedly to identify their fellows.

Artistic or political eminence was far from being the sole ground of admission. Having freed herself of domestic responsibilities by engaging a reliable butler, marrying her daughter to the first comer and banishing her sons to remote diplomatic posts, Mrs. St. John could devote her restless energy to the single ambition of finding out what was going on. This she described vaguely as "keeping up with the times"; and for this she would steal the brief repose of the well-primed journalist and invade the leisure of the harassed theatrical-manager. Young lovers were invited to declare the progress of their passion; clandestine sinners were required to forecast the course of their latest intrigue.

As a clearing-house for literary sensations, political alliances, matrimonial catastrophes and social enmities, Stratton Park was unrivalled and indispensable.

"If there are any new developments about father and the Fisons, I suppose I shall hear them from Dot," Gloria reflected. "He'll never tell me." . . .

As she had her compartment to herself from Waterloo to Basingstoke, there was every inducement to review her position coldly, broadly and for seventy undisturbed minutes.

"Norman's not fit to look after himself . . . With that horrible mother of his always intriguing. . . . Father will let me down if he has half a chance. . . . And something drastic must be done *immediately!*"

In the three days since her return from Gloucestershire, everything had gone amiss at the same time. The peace-kite which she had sent up over Melby was still fluttering unacknowledged; Norman's meagre letters only repeated that his probation with May-Kingston would occupy at least two years; and the admiral, arriving home unheralded after ten days' racing, brought with him an atmosphere of disaster that forced itself upon Gloria's terrified notice when she asked for five pounds to cover her expenses in Hampshire.

"That's good, my dear!" chuckled the admiral. "Oh, that's devilish good! Come out to lunch, and I'll tell you all about it."

On reaching the restaurant which the admiral favoured in seasons of penury or discretion, they found Percy Kendaile hovering mysteriously in the hall. Gloria had invited him to join them before her quick ears caught the murmur of a colloquy between the manager and her father. More than the few chance words that reached her, the deference of the one and the indignation of the other apprised her that further credit was being refused until an old account had been settled.

"Come on, father, and help me choose!" she called out before the whispered altercation could travel to Percy. "This is my party."

Then, with outward unconcern and a heart of lead, she prepared for the moment when she would have to meet the bill with an empty note-case and a shilling or two of small change. A varied training enabled her to talk and laugh as course followed course; but her guests had reached their liqueurs before she had done more than recognize that, if she borrowed five pounds from Percy, within twenty-four hours Freddie would, somehow, have turned her straits to account. The neighbouring tables began to empty; at last even the admiral recollected an overdue appointment; and it was only when she found herself alone with Percy that inspiration overtook Gloria. Handing him the bill and her bag, she murmured:

"Will you settle about this for me?"

Later, when they met in the hall, she received her bag back with as much composure as Percy shewed in giving it to her; but the memory of the trick, even after twenty-four hours, still brought the blood to her cheeks.

"If only I can make some money at *chemin-de-fer*," she whispered to the empty carriage; "I can write to Percy: '*What must you think of me? When I got home, I found all my money lying on my dressing-table! It was sweet of you not to make me feel a fool, of course; but you were very naughty not to tell me afterwards*'. . . If I don't win . . ." In other days, on the plea that she was overdrawn, Gloria had borrowed unhesitatingly from Freddie, partly because it was immediately convenient, partly because she established her independence and something more by paying him back promptly. "Fancy asking Norman!"

There were moments when "little Norman Head-in-Air" seemed to understand nothing. Herein, perhaps, lay the seed of all her discontent, her need for Freddie, her nearly disastrous

prosecution of even Percy's society: she wanted to feel herself desired, to be kissed again by Norman or at least to be kissed.

"These cold-blooded English. . .," she whispered to the bright-eyed reflection in the mirror, as the train slowed into Basingstoke.

As at Waterloo, she was the only passenger bound for the St. Johns', though the house was half-full when she arrived.

"The admiral's here," announced her hostess. "Why didn't you come together? Were you afraid of being *de trop*? There's a letter for you from Freddie."

"Oh, couldn't he come?" asked Gloria. "He was afraid he mightn't be able to. . . . Who else is here?"

Mrs. St. John embarked on a list of names; but Gloria could spare no attention until she had read her letter:

"*'My dear Gloria'*—I'm glad he's not fool enough to call me 'Dear Miss Britton';" she told herself; "though it always *used* to be 'Darling Gloria'. . . . Well. . . . *'I'm afraid we shall not meet at Stratton this week-end; in fact, I think I told you that I should be unable to get away. . . .'* Is Freddie becoming a strong, silent man? 'What I have said I have said'. . . . *'As I told you, anything we can do will be done. . . .'* We? Is that the honorific plural? No, he means his old father. *'My father would like a good talk with Norman whenever he cares to come over, though—to prevent disappointment—it's only fair to say that you mustn't expect anything very wonderful for some years. . . .'* I don't want to wait!" she whispered so plaintively that she feared her companion must have overheard her. "*'If Norman's to be of any use, he will have to start pretty well at the bottom. . . .'*" Freddie continued; but Gloria's patience was exhausted, and she hurried on to the end of the letter. "*'If you'd like to discuss things first with my father, why don't you propose yourself for a week-end? I don't know what my own movements will be, but he'll be here all the summer.'*" . . . He doesn't care if I come or not. Or *thinks* he doesn't. I bet he'll dance to a different tune if I *do* go there." She threw her arm round Mrs. St. John's neck and kissed her. "Sorry, darling! I haven't been listening a bit. Who? Mrs. Fison? . . . I can't make out what father *sees* in her."

"Come and have some tea," suggested Mrs. St. John, when she had satisfied herself that Gloria could shed no new light on the last but not least promising divorce.

As they went out to the lawn Gloria breathed a thanksgiving that Norman had not been there to see the admiral arriving with Mrs. Fison; then she submitted to being introduced smilingly

to a company of which one half was pitying her public humiliation, while the others only relished the piquancy of the meeting.

"This . . . just about . . . puts the lid on," she whispered, as a chilling sense of desolation set her lips trembling. Hitherto her father and she had substituted for affection a guilty freemasonry engendered of common scrapes and joint privations. It was restful to have one companion before whom appearances did not have to be kept up; and, until he decided that she had reached an age when a girl knew as much as she would ever know, the admiral had been reticent about so much of his illicit passions as did not of necessity overflow into the expansive conversation of his after-dinner mood. "How could *any* girl make a fine thing of life. . . ?" Suddenly, as though another moment's strain would have broken her bones, she realized that she must get away at once: to Newbridge, Melby, the house that Freddie had offered to take for her in Italy. "I'll send him a telegram to-night. And I don't care if Dot reads it." . . .

When breakfast was brought to her next morning, her telegram to Melby was still unanswered; and Norman's letter, if more discursive than usual, bore a closer resemblance to a text-book on contracting than to a heated avowal of passion.

"*Before I decide anything, I want to have a talk with you,*" he concluded; and Gloria scribbled in reply that she had invited herself to stay with the Kendailles again and would telephone as soon as she reached Melby.

Then she lay back in bed, fascinated by a new conception of marriage. Norman had made up his mind already, and she was to be forced into his unalterable scheme of life. At two-and-twenty she had probably gained more experience than he at twenty-six; certainly she had as many preferences; but in his eyes, though of course he loved her, she was without an independent will and must learn the times and ways of the place like a new servant.

"*It happens* that people have usually done what I wanted. I shan't insist on that always; but do men realize that we're just as . . . complicated as they are and that, all our lives, we've been adding one bit of personality to another? We're not children. . . . And we're not creatures that you pick up off the street." . . .

Springing out of bed, she stood in the sunshine with her arms resting on the sill of the window. Outside on the lawn, Dot St. John was driving her guests before her like chickens at feeding-time; a footman appeared with a dust-rug over one arm and a bundle of golf-bags under the other; almost guiltily four drowsy conversationalists started from their chairs and headed for the

tennis-courts; the old and infirm were burdened with morning papers.

"I ought to be helping," mused Gloria, as Mrs. St. John's energetic figure flashed in and out of the little groups, disseminating unrest. "I suppose I'm not really . . . earning my *keep*, but I don't see why I should be forced into Dot's scheme of life. Or father's," she continued furiously, as she watched the admiral making for Mrs. Fison's chair and, after one furtive glance around, carrying her off for a walk. "If Norman doesn't get me out of this, I'll find some one who will. Why should he be allowed to spoil my day and put me in a vile temper by behaving as though being in love were the same thing as, oh anything!, engaging a new secretary?" . . .

4

Few men and fewer women could boast that they had ever received a letter from Freddie Kendaile. The more personal communications of a life deliberately mysterious were embodied in telegrams, which the cynical explained on the theory that he had already written enough to feel shy of committing himself in black and white. Hitherto he had made an exception in Gloria's favour; and the shock of receiving a mangled telephone message in place of his customary bantering note was not diminished by the knowledge that he intended her to be shocked.

"A demonstration?" she asked herself on Sunday afternoon, as she pieced together the statements that some one, whose name could not be heard, was afraid there would be no chance of his seeing Miss Britton, but that his parents were expecting her.

"Is there any answer, miss?" enquired the footman.

Gloria knew that she must not allow herself to be hurried.

"I'll write, thanks . . . It was only Freddie," she explained to Mrs. St. John. "About next week-end."

Through the momentary silence which automatically falls on any company when a telegram or note is delivered to one of its members, a drawling voice repeated the name interrogatively:

"Some one told me that he was gettin' married."

"What I heard was only *indirectly* concerned with marriage," volunteered the well-fed voice of Mrs. Fison.

Some one, whom Gloria could not identify, loosed an explosive bark of laughter.

"At *present*," qualified the admiral.

"If we're going to talk scandal, let's do it properly, with names complete," suggested Mrs. St. John avidly.

A silence followed, and another voice enquired :

"When is a scandal not a scandal? Before people begin talking about it. I shouldn't call this a scandal as yet, but we shall make ourselves responsible for creating one if we talk about it."

Gloria looked up gratefully and found that it was Colonel St. John who was speaking. She could have jumped up and kissed his hand for something which she tried vainly to define. Was it for the mild and indirect snub to Mrs. Fison? Was it for protecting Freddie? Or for protecting her against the implication that he was grown tired of her? Gloria did not know, but she *did* know that she hated all the others; and, as the discussion, checked at one outlet, overflowed in giggling whispers, she realized that she could remain at Stratton no longer without creating a scene.

"The Kendailles are going to see if they can find Norman a job," she confided to Dot; "and this is my only chance of seeing Freddie before he goes away. If I can get up to London to-night . . . You *do* understand, don't you, Dot?"

Her hostess threw an apprehensive glance at the disintegrating group on the lawn. The party had not enough momentum for her to dispense readily with Gloria's propulsion; but it seemed doubtful whether any one could retain her.

"If you feel you *must* go," she sighed. "I'll see what the trains are like."

"And I'll . . . I'll say good-bye to my father," said Gloria through set teeth.

When she reached Gloucester the following day, her head was still ringing with the broken phrases of her farewell outburst. "Not another night, not another hour! . . . *Vile* woman . . . I *will* say that! I'll say just what I like. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for bringing her here! . . . I *won't* apologize! She *is* . . . And you know it. . . . I don't care! . . . I don't care! . . . I won't come back till you get rid of her." . . . Having once given rein to her tongue, Gloria let fly reproaches of increasing bitterness until she no longer cared whether they were justified; and the admiral, who was too unready to meet her indictment charge by charge, only awaited an opportunity of collecting the shreds of his dignity before walking out of the room with a sigh and a shrug.

"I never want to see him again! I hope I never shall!" she cried aloud, as she looked for Freddie's tall form among the waiting crowd scattered along the platform.

Though it was a shock to realize that he had not come to meet

her, Gloria was reconciled to finding him already gone if she were allowed to luxuriate in the kindness of his parents and so to forget the nightmare of her last days in London and Hampshire. In response to her second message, a car had been sent for her ; and, though its conspicuous emptiness seemed another possible demonstration of Freddie's independence, she was not sorry, after the heat and noise of the train, to have ten minutes to construct a plausible explanation of her portentous arrival.

"I can only say that I wanted to see Freddie before he went away . . ." she decided.

Then her gaze was caught and held by two leather suit-cases and a hat-box, with Freddie's initials, piled by the door ; on a table inside the hall lay dust-coat, hat and gloves ; Gloria had barely satisfied herself that Freddie was still in the house when he appeared carrying a despatch-box which he added to the pile.

"I was afraid you might have started already ! I'm so glad you haven't !" she cried with a smile that prayed forgetfulness of their late differences.

"I'm not going till the eleven forty-seven. How are you, Gloria ?" he enquired with grave courtesy. "I'm afraid you must have had a very tiring journey. I've ordered some breakfast for you ; and then you'll be wise to lie down for a bit."

"Dear Freddie, you *are* sweet to me !"

"I'm afraid my parents won't be back till this evening ; before your message arrived, they'd arranged to go over to Cheltenham and they couldn't put it off. But Mary—that's the maid you had before—will see that you have everything you want."

Screened by the cloud of his own easy conversation, he led the way into the dining-room, where an alluring smell of hot bacon reminded Gloria that she had eaten nothing since tea the day before. She remained standing, however, while Freddie uncovered dish after dish, and refused to accept even a cup of coffee until their new relationship had been defined.

"I'm going to hold you to your promise about Norman," she began. "How long are you going to be away ?"

"I'm afraid I can hardly say. . . . You'll find I've explained everything to my father."

"But I want to talk it over with you, too. . . . I've been so looking forward to seeing you, Freddie. *Must* you go ? I feel I was so horrid the last time I was here."

"I'm afraid I must."

Though his tone was still gravely courteous, mere courtesy was an insult after her own frank apology.

"Where are you going, Freddie?" she demanded.

Ingenuous surprise revealed itself for a moment in the arching of his brows:

"I'm going to London for a few days."

"And you decided to go when you heard I was coming to-day?"

Without answering, Freddie arranged round her plate a semi-circle of toast, butter, coffee and cream.

"Do sit down," he suggested at length.

"I expect you to be nice to me," said Gloria. "What with one thing and another, I'm about at the end of my tether."

"I'm sorry. . . . You know I'll do anything I can."

"Then countermand the car!" cried Gloria imperiously.

"But I have some people dining with me."

"Send a wire to say you're not coming."

"Don't you think that would be a little rude to them?"

"Can you think of anything ruder than going away the moment you hear I'm coming?"

"But it's my father you're going to see. Do begin your breakfast before everything's cold."

Finding no thoroughfare along that line of argument, Gloria turned off at right angles:

"What's happened, Freddie? Of course, you must go or not as you please; but we've always been fairly frank, and I should like to know why you're bolting like this when you assured me only a week ago that you *wouldn't* try to avoid me."

"I think I said that we hadn't *quarrelled*," he corrected her.

"We *shall* quarrel if you go off when I ask you to stay."

"Is that quite reasonable, Gloria? I don't interfere with your freedom of action; with great respect, d'you feel you have any right to interfere with mine?"

"No right at all, unless friendship counts for anything. Not so long ago you implored me to ask you to do things for me, I was to let you prove your devotion. Well . . ."

"You will probably agree that things have changed somewhat."

Gloria sighed and kept her eyes averted for fear of shewing him their bright malice:

"I hear that on all hands: at Abergeldy; at Newbridge, before I came here; in London; at the St. Johns'. I thought you had better taste. I believe I even thought that the much-talked-of 'devotion' was real."

If she could make him lose his temper, Gloria felt that he would at least satisfy her whether Mrs. Dropford exercised any power over him.

"Whether the devotion was real or not, didn't you shew me rather plainly that it was superfluous?" he asked. "That was the only change I had in mind."

"Then there's been no change. For years I've told you that I could never marry you. Because I happen to feel that a girl's not justified in taking and taking when she can give nothing in return, you say I'm shewing you that your devotion is superfluous. You're hard to please, Freddie; you don't make it easy for people to be friends with you; and you don't encourage a woman to preserve any little shred of self-respect that she may have. . . . I think I'll take your advice and lie down; I've a splitting headache. I don't want any breakfast."

With jerky decision she walked away from the table; and Freddie hurried after her in time to open the door.

"*Thank you!*" she laughed ironically. "It's something to save these small attentions out of the wreckage."

"If you ate something, it might do your head good," he suggested.

"Or it might choke me. . . . You needn't stay away more than one night: I shall be gone to-morrow."

"I've not really decided how long I shall be away," he answered with the same enigmatic detachment.

"And this is really the end? The end of all your love, your protestations? I asked you to meet me at the St. Johns', I travelled all night to see you, I begged you to stay here: could humiliation go farther than that? Oh yes! I told you I was at the end of my tether. Even when I traded on my sex, it didn't fan that old devotion to life."

"If you're feeling ill, of course I'll stay."

"For fear of risking your reputation as a good host? Freddie, have you quite forgotten the days when you liked doing things because I asked you? You used to say it was a privilege."

"An expensive privilege. No man's rich enough to part with his peace of mind."

Gloria sighed and turned to him in the doorway, reaching up until she could place her hands on his shoulders and rest her cheek against his chest:

"I'm sorry to have been so unsatisfactory, Freddie. Say good-bye and try to forgive me. I'm sorry to drive you away like this, but perhaps you're right to go. . . . Can you have something sent up to me? I'm sick with hunger. Don't bring it up yourself. If we go on arguing, I'm afraid you'll make me cry."

As she walked dejectedly upstairs, Gloria reflected that the fulness of her defeat was to be measured by Freddie's refusal even to kiss her hand or to stroke her hair when she turned with a forlorn gesture of weary helplessness that would have wrung a protective caress from an inquisitor. After that, she retained hardly enough sensibility to be hurt on finding that she had been given her usual room, that there were flowers on every table and that the bathroom was clouded with fragrant steam.

"Freddie has a fiendishly good eye for detail and finish," she murmured, "even when he's being fiendishly cruel. It's a great send-off. I wonder whether Norman can take me in. . . . A great send-off. And when he comes to say good-bye . . ."

She began to undress quickly that she might have had her bath and be comfortably in bed when he disobeyed her orders and brought up her breakfast. After the dust and discomfort of the journey, the hot water was consoling to her chilled blood ; and she was only beginning languidly to brush her hair when a maid came in with a tray. Gloria had felt so sure that Freddie would bring it that she remained rigid in the pose which she had prepared for him ; there was seemingly a further perfection of defeat when she fancied that she could sink no lower, and for a moment the shock deprived her tired brain of all inventiveness for fetching him. As she got into bed and began sipping the coffee, her watch marked a quarter past eleven ; Freddie would be going in a few minutes, and, though she did not know what more she could say to him, self-respect forbade her to let him slip away.

With one hand to the bell and the other stretched to collect paper and pencil, she began to address an envelope to her father.

"Will you ask Mr. Kendaille to come here for a moment before he goes ?" she said to the maid. "I've a very important letter that I want him to post for me in London."

She was still writing when Freddie knocked at the door and asked if she had everything that she wanted.

"I thought, if you'd post this for me, it would save me a telegram," she explained. "Freddie, I don't want to begin this discussion again, but isn't it rather absurd for you to be running away like this ? If you'll let me, I should like to spend the *whole* of to-day in bed ; and, if I leave first thing to-morrow morning, I can't upset your peace of mind *very* much."

"But there are these people who are dining with me," he reminded her.

"Ah, you daren't disappoint *them*," she answered with soft venom. "Then it *is* as bad as people say? Freddie, you warned me that I should be unhappy if I married Norman, but you'll know nothing but black misery if you get into the clutches of *that* woman. Apart from the scandal, which—I should have thought—couldn't be very pleasant for your people."

As she reached for more paper, Gloria tried to see from his reflection in the mirror whether she had penetrated his harness.

"Which woman is this?" Freddie asked imperturbably.

"Elfie Dropford, of course," cried Gloria recklessly. "I have her thrust down my throat wherever I go. If I were a man, I'd sooner marry a . . . calculating-machine."

"At the risk of disloyalty to the poor lady, so would I," he agreed.

The prompt, cool answer so upset all her preconceptions that Gloria could only write blindly and meaninglessly, with face bent low over the paper.

"People are talking about you a good deal," she informed him at length.

"I'm sorry you should have been bothered by it."

"It's no affair of *mine*!"

"I thought you seemed . . . resentful," he laughed.

Gloria sighed extravagantly to hide her mortification. Freddie's lips had been framed to say "jealous", and he had substituted "resentful" after a pause long enough to emphasize his meaning.

"I was only sorry to see a woman of that kind making a fool of you."

"Yet I wonder whether she did. Perhaps she had her place in the divine order of things: you and I may both be under an obligation to her. In the last fortnight, don't you feel she's helped to wash away some illusions from both our minds?"

Gloria paused to thrust the letter into its envelope and then looked up into his face:

"Until a fortnight ago I certainly thought you cared for me."

"That was not an illusion." Freddie pulled a chair to the bedside and sat down with a smile at his own thoughts. "I *did* care for you, Gloria, more than I've ever cared for any one in my life; I care for you still, as much as ever. You . . . hit me between wind and water as no other woman has ever done. I've tried a thousand and one—tricks, we agreed to call them, I think—, a thousand and one tricks to get you. The house in

Italy, when I thought Norman was becoming dangerous . . . It was a trick when I offered to help him, you were right to use the word : I knew that nothing my father could offer him would be worth having for half-a-dozen years, and in that time you'd see for yourself—what I couldn't make you see—that you and he were hopelessly unsuitable. You would become engaged on the strength of my father's help and break off the engagement without any help from any one ; it's not because you don't love him or he doesn't love you, I well believe that you'll never love any one as you love him, but your temperaments and outlook and upbringing are too incompatible. When you'd broken off the engagement, you'd be very miserable for a time, and I should try to comfort you at a distance without making you think I was reopening something that was already closed. You would be grateful, you would remember that I stood aside, against my own interests, to help you, perhaps you would remember that I alone knew you well enough to be sure that the engagement would break down. And I do know you extraordinarily well. . . . It was a trick, and we can go on with it from the moment you see my father to-night ; and every word I'm saying will be made true within two years, and you and Norman will go through hell for the barren pleasure of proving me right." . . . He smiled again ; but Gloria's expression drove the smile away ; and, when he resumed, his voice had lost its earlier kindness. " You will doubtless regard this refreshing candour as a trick, too ; but, as my strongest card is always that I *do* know you so well, you can check the truth of what I'm saying, though I don't expect you to admit it's true. I know you too well for that, my dear ! You're incapable of truth as yet, because you don't know yourself. Well, this tiresome Dropford woman. I encouraged people to talk about us because I wanted to make you jealous ; and jealous you were, Gloria, till three minutes ago ! You always took me for granted so much that I had to let you feel suddenly uncertain of me ; a week ago you weighed me up and decided that, though you'd hate to lose me, you *could* get on without me. I made my bow and retired. During this last week you haven't been quite sure, have you ? The letters and messages *ordering* me here and there . . . Well, I don't want to rub it in. This letter that *must* be posted in London to-day ; I should tear it up, if I were you, Gloria ; you can always wire, and I've missed my train (not that I ever meant to go by it). . . . So Elsie Dropford has served her turn in shewing that you would *hate* to let me go altogether. And I don't want to. I'll leave no stone unturned to get you ! . . . But I meant what I said

about peace of mind : this racket is upsetting your nerves and upsetting mine. If you prefer to go on with the Norman business, we'll make what excuse you like ; but I cannot and will not meet you. We'll say good-bye . . . and see what happens ; but no more cat-and-mouse. If you prefer *not* to say good-bye, there are several arguments I could put forward to convince you why you should marry me."

Gloria lifted her tray on to the table by her bed and tore up her letter.

"And now, if I've been patient enough, perhaps you'll leave me," she said, looking up to him with glittering eyes. "I don't care for *liars* ; and I'm not for sale."

"My dear, don't be melodramatic ! I thought we were being candid ! You're shrewd ; and if we can give up pretending . . . Your life will be whatever money can make it. You've always felt the lack of a suitable frame : your . . . family hasn't done much to shew you in a good setting, and the first time you entered Newbridge you saw yourself as the *grande dame*. My dear, I was watching you that night ! Well, I don't get much amusement out of that sort of thing ; but, if you want it, you shall have it : I'll make my father engineer a peerage for himself, and you can have enough pomp and glory to take the colour out of Newbridge. Best of all, I shall be a great support to you. Norman's too young and he'll never understand you ; we have no roots in the soil, you and I ; we're modern, worldly, grabbing and struggling newcomers, of the earth earthy, with no kind of tradition. Norman would never control you, because he doesn't know you ; and you need some control, Gloria, if you're not to give in to the weak strain in your character. You feel that ? . . . I needn't tell you all you'd do for me . . ."

Gloria drew herself upright in bed and pressed her hands against her eyes :

"I don't think you need tell me *anything* more ! I hoped to have a little rest ; but, if you'll leave me now, I'll get up. Would you mind telephoning to Newbridge. . . ?"

After a quick glance, Freddie rose and brought her a memorandum block :

"So much for candour ! You prefer these unreal scenes ? Dear Gloria, I don't want to hit you when you're down, but I know you so well that this play-acting doesn't take me in. When you stalked upstairs, expecting me to hurry after you with breakfast in one hand and an apology in the other . . . It's no use pretending to be angry : if you were angry, you'd have sent me away ten minutes ago . . ."

"At least I needn't endure another ten *seconds*!"

As she began to write, Freddie watched her closely; and the satirical smile faded from his eyes.

"I'll send any message you like," he promised, "but, while you're pretending, I'm in earnest: if you give me that message, that message goes. You'll no doubt be welcomed at Newbridge, but I'm afraid you won't be welcomed here again; and you'll lose me—for whatever I may be worth—without gaining anything in return, as you'll find when you break with Norman. I was prepared to wait for that, but not after warning you like this; I'm not ready to wait tamely till you've made up your mind that there's nothing as good anywhere else. You must decide between us now; and first of all make quite sure that you can spare me. If you can, . . . it'll be really good-bye."

As she finished writing, Gloria forced a smile and handed him the message:

"Will you send that? And who's being melodramatic now? As I told you before, I refuse to quarrel with you; and I'll tell you frankly that I've missed you. I'm going to Newbridge because I think it's best: we've upset each other's nerves quite enough, I should think. But I'll come back, if you like; or, if you prefer it, I won't go." . . .

She stopped suddenly on finding that she was confusing her set speeches. Freddie was right: while he was in earnest, she was pretending . . . and with so little conviction that she did not know what she was pretending. He was right in saying that, if she had been angry, she would have dismissed him long before; he was right in saying that she had missed him and could not afford to lose him; perhaps he was right in hinting that, if she left Melby for Newbridge, he would not allow her to come back. Yet, if she had ever had any power over him, he could not so suddenly shake it off.

"Shall I have this message sent?" he asked.

Gloria's tired brain wandered in bewilderment among the poses which she had assumed and discarded.

"As you find it impossible to stay in the same house with me. . . ." she faltered. "I've made you lose your train. . . . I don't know what you *want*, Freddie; I'm too tired, too miserable to think." . . . She closed her eyes for a moment and then looked up at him; but the faltering tone and trembling voice seemed wasted on him. "I feel so giddy."

Her arms fell slowly to her sides, and her head drooped forward until her face was pressing against her knees. In other days Freddie would have sprung to her aid, but there was

neither sound nor movement ; this make-believe—in common with the rest—failed to impose on him, he left her to play out her farce to its dreary, unapplauded end ; and she wondered dizzily whether he had always seen through her.

“ You’ve no need to be miserable.”

Without looking up, Gloria found that his voice had come nearer ; though she heard no movement, one side of the bed was gently depressed as he sat down. His sleeve chafed her skin through the flimsy silk of her night-dress ; but the tense arm and wrist, imprisoning her as in a steel angle, broke down her resistance until she melted powerless in his embrace.

Warm drowsiness fell upon her brain, shrouding it against a hundred thoughts which she could not now bear to entertain ; security and peace, such as she seemed all her life to have been craving to attain, advanced soothingly through her drowsiness, and, when they halted at a secret check, she lifted her face and waited for her lips to be kissed. She would cry, faint, die if some one did not love her ! Vagrant memory, not yet stilled, whispered that once before, a thousand years before, she had refused to let him kiss her, that once before, a thousand years before, she had been kissed by lips that seemed to devour her ; lying between death and life, she felt that, if he did not kiss her, she would go mad ; and, when at last she was slowly lifted until her mouth pressed tremblingly on his, a shiver passed through her and, in a long shuddering sigh, life itself seemed to ebb out of her.

A voice out of the darkness and silence whispered ironically :

“ Well, Gloria ? ”

Deafening herself to the mockery she answered :

“ Stay with me ! Don’t leave me ! Oh, don’t leave me ! ”

Vagrant memory, in its last struggle with oblivion, muttered that she had used the words before, to some one else, who had disregarded them ; but she left the mutter unheeded and only waited for her swimming brain to drown memory and for black security and warm peace to envelop her.

CHAPTER FIVE

POPLAR RIDGE

"Heav'n but the Vision of fulfill'd Desire,
And Hell the Shadow from a Soul on fire. . . ."
—EDWARD FITZGERALD: *Omar Khayyam*.

I

LYING with her eyes shaded, Gloria woke to see, between the fingers of her hand, that the sun, which was streaming through the window on her left when she first went to bed, had abandoned the frontal attack which it had launched while Freddie talked to her and was now shining through the right window so blindingly that she had to lie on her left side. The time must be late afternoon, and that was enough to know at present.

Mrs. Kendaile would soon be returning from Cheltenham; and, whether she liked it or not, Gloria had to face this meeting. By saying that she was ill, she could avoid meeting Freddie and his father; but the servants had been told that she was only resting after her broken night, and Mrs. Kendaile would be harder to deceive if they met alone. For this encounter—and for a vista of life which she was not yet equal to contemplating—, Gloria knew that she must rehearse herself back into a character that was no longer herself: she would be presumed innocent until she was proved guilty, but she would prove herself guilty unless she presumed her own innocence. For a moment she wondered whether the servants suspected; then she realized that wonder was a euphemism for misgiving, and it was just this tell-tale misgiving that would undermine her confidence. There must be no sign that she had changed from child to woman.

There *should* be no sign. . . .

Freddie, with little or nothing of her actor training, had enough native shrewdness to mask all emotion. While they were together, she was conscious of a new tenderness untouched by

arrogance ; and, when the butler brought in their luncheon on two trays, she saw only the alert, watchful master who gave his orders a little sharply, the considerate, good-natured host who jested with her and offered to read aloud to her. With the closing of the door, he reverted to his new, transcendental tenderness ; throughout the long summer afternoon Gloria had felt herself wrapped in unheeding peace, and, when at last she fell asleep, her warm, new security kept memory at a distance. All of the brain that was not stunned whispered to her that the rest was stunned.

In time she would, indeed, have to take stock : a distant clatter of saucers warned her that Freddie would soon arrive with her tea. Gloria looked at a disordered tray with piled plates and crumpled napkins, as though by concentrating her attention on it she could keep her mind from springing into the future. A sense of tremendous guilt was waiting for her, but she refused to receive it until she was grown accustomed to the idea that everything was changed ; when she had explored the change in her character and outlook, her relations to people whom she would not yet name, it would be time enough to try a fall with these terrific, intangible shapes of sin and dishonour. As yet she felt no fear of God or man ; though her spirit had been robbed of its isolation, she was at peace.

When she was capable of thinking in names and personalities, Gloria realized that she was fully awake ; and fear poured irresistibly into the opening recesses of her mind. If Freddie taunted her by look or word, even by an infinitesimal assurance of manner, she would be annihilated. Desperate impulses of self-preservation urged her to revile him by saying that it was his fault alone, to pretend that she was repaying his long love in the only way possible to her. Surely no man could be so brutal as to taunt her ; and yet she had tried his patience for years.

The slam of a door far away downstairs warned her that she must allot him his place before he returned ; but the movement of her brain was arrested by a new fear :

" I suppose he doesn't think this will make any difference. I'm not going to marry him." Her assurance was struck dead by the chilling reflection that he might not now want to marry her. " He knows what I'm like—or thinks he does. And yet I don't feel a bit wicked." . . .

For a moment she speculated at a tangent why she had yielded to a man whom she did not intend to marry. Loneliness, dejection, a hunger too strong to be withstood, an aggrieved sense of neglect and that yearning to keep him in her life all played

their part ; but hunger was the most insistent. It had tortured her with a force so great that it seemed to come from outside her ; it was a craving, inherited with the passionate blood of her parents.

" Either I'm not accountable . . ." Freddie himself had spoken of the ' weak strain ' in her character. " Or else . . . or else I'm just frankly depraved. Yet . . . wickedness . . . is . . . only a convention," she argued against a voice that now muttered a new name. To drown it, she occupied herself with thoughts of her father : " I wonder what *he'd* say if he knew. . . . But I don't see why there should be one law for men and another for women. He and Mrs. Fison." . . . A new dread of realization assailed her. " My God, if I heard any one say Freddie was my lover . . ." The word was terrible when the fact which it expressed seemed harmless ; and, as though all her dilatory speculation converged on one point, the new compelling voice thundered a name which she could no longer disregard :

" Norman . . . If Norman ever suspected, it would be all over. I can't tell *him*. Freddie ? . . . I think Freddie's capable of most things, but he can't do *that*. I suppose I've wronged Norman frightfully ; and yet, as long as he doesn't know, it has nothing to do with him. I feel quite differently with him, Freddie has no place there at all. With Norman it's love, and I could never love any one else in the same way. I don't suppose Norman would refuse to marry me if he heard I'd been kissed, and it's not made any more *difference* than that." . . .

To her own critical ear this sudden vehemence suggested that she was trying to browbeat herself into conviction.

" I shouldn't do any *good* by telling him," she reasoned. " I should upset an ideal, spoil both our lives. . . . I'm not keeping back any part of my love ; and if I don't ask how he lived before marrying . . ."

That line of defence broke down before Gloria's instinctive faith that Norman's life before marriage would contain no secret pages.

" And he'll assume it's the same with me. We shall start all wrong, I shall always feel mean and guilty. Sooner or later it will kill our love, I shall never be able to share his life if I'm keeping something hidden away. I shall have to tell him."

The resolution, once taken, seemed so inevitable that Gloria wondered why she had ever doubted. Already she had proved the strength of love that she could arouse in Norman, and that day had shewn her the full helplessness of all men in love. When Norman had again been brought under her spell, she could ask

him what he would do if she were unfaithful to him ; she would press him until he promised to forgive her whatever she might do ; after that, it would be easy to promise that he should have nothing to forgive ; and, after that, it would be easier still to make him forgive her for what she had done.

2

A light knock fell upon the door ; and Gloria sat up in bed, rigid with terror. In her eagerness to see Norman, she had forgotten to prepare a formula for telling Freddie that, amid all the changes that had overtaken them, her refusal to marry him remained unchanged.

"Come in !"

A maid entered with a tea-tray ; and at her heels Gloria saw Freddie, schooled in voice and bearing to the presence of an audience, but alert for her every tone and movement.

"Did you manage to get any sleep ?" he asked. "I expect you'd like the tray on this table, wouldn't you ? And I want to know if you'll let me have tea with you."

"I should love you to," Gloria answered in the same measure. "Bring up a chair, won't you ?"

As the door closed, he strode noiselessly to the bed and threw his arms about her :

"My darling !"

This, Gloria knew, was their critical moment : by resisting she would precipitate a scene for which she was not ready ; by yielding to his embrace now, she made it harder to resist later.

"Oh, Freddie, do be careful !" she exclaimed petulantly. "You're upsetting everything. Let me go ! You're hurting me !"

"I'm sorry."

The apology and the petulance chilled his ardour and gained her precious time. She began to pour out tea, secure in the belief that she could keep him at arm's length.

They had not been together for more than five minutes when a crunch of rubber tyres on fine gravel was followed by the arrival of Mrs. Kendaille with enquiries and explanations of her absence. Gloria, in her turn, apologized for coming at such short notice ; and the matter-of-fact questions and answers, clearly uttered in a room where hitherto there had been only whispering, flung her into the present and edged her memory of the day into the borderland of dreams.

"I'm quite all right, as you can see," she protested. "At

least you *will* see, if Freddie will pull up the blinds." The rushing afternoon sunshine poured in a golden flood over the floor and climbed the bed until it bathed her face. The last lurking mystery vanished with the last shadow; and, though Gloria dared not lift her eyes to Freddie's face, she could allow the light to shine on her own. Mrs. Kendaile was looking anxiously at her, but she had not guessed. "I wanted to have a little talk about . . . business; and, when Freddie said that he might be going away, I thought I'd come at once before going on to . . . to the Stevensons'. There was just time to do it, but it was a horribly hot and tiring journey, so I told Freddie I'd like to have a rest. I'm coming down to dinner, of course."

Mrs. Kendaile rang for another cup, and they talked until it was time for Gloria to get up.

"Shall I telephone to Norman," asked Freddie, "and get him over for a meal so that he can have a talk with my father?"

His voice was once more tuned to the presence of an audience, and Gloria felt that she was expected to enter into by-play for the benefit of Mrs. Kendaile. Already he was perhaps asking himself whether they need keep up the farce of wanting to help Norman.

"I was thinking I might walk over to Newbridge," she answered. "I've had no exercise all day."

"There's hardly time before dinner," Freddie pointed out.

"I'll go afterwards."

"We'll send you over in a car."

In dread that he would offer to accompany her when she most wanted to be alone, Gloria seized the opportunity of repudiating his implied claim to keep her under observation:

"I should prefer to walk, thanks. I love walking at night, in the woods, all by myself."

"Don't tire yourself, that's all," he advised with a return of his new gentleness.

As Mrs. Kendaile went out of the room, he bent eagerly over the bed:

"Kiss me, sweetheart!"

"No!"

"Just once!"

"No!"

"But why not?"

"Because I'm going to have my bath. . . . You must run away, Freddie, or you'll make me late for dinner."

As she looked calmly up at him, she saw that his eyes were pleading.

"Just once?" he begged again.

"No."

"When may I?"

"Never."

"If you won't give it me, I shall take it."

"If you touch me, I shall scream."

For all his knowledge of women, Freddie was baffled by this sudden change. Drawing himself up, he looked at her in undisguised perplexity, then shrugged his shoulders and walked to the door.

As soon as she heard it close, Gloria jumped out of bed and locked it. Though at last she had her room to herself, even the locking of the door did not bring back privacy: cigarette-smoke hung in a level blue line across the still air, the tea-tray was littered with half-empty plates, and two arm-chairs stood angularly by the bed.

"As though . . . I don't belong to myself . . . any more . . ."

She escaped to the bathroom and turned on both taps, then threw a handful of pungent salts into the tepid water and sank into it with a shiver. Her finger-nails were tinged with blue when she began to dress; but at least her flesh was cool, and she had washed away a sense of suffocation.

3

Sheltered from the eyes and windows of Melby, Gloria halted among the first trees by the bridle-path to Newbridge and stood listening to the gentle rustling of the night. Shafts of silver between the arching branches overhead covered the grey turf with a rich lace of light and shadow; a young rabbit, startled by the crack of a dry twig under her foot, bounded twenty yards into safety and then turned to watch her; in the distance an owl hooted once and lapsed into silence.

Gloria let fall her cloak and stood with her arms and shoulders gleaming white in the caressing rays of the moon, a little breathless and more than a little confused. She hardly remembered how she had survived the artificiality of dinner, with Mrs. Kendaille pressing food upon her and Freddie watching her in taciturn perplexity; but she recalled vaguely an altercation, almost a scene, before they allowed her to escape.

Now she began to consider for the first time what she should say to Norman. The measure of his surprise at seeing her was

the measure of her own advantage ; if he had jealousy to arouse, it would be flicked when she came to him for a tantalizing moment from Melby ; and, whatever the welcome he offered her, she had learned from Freddie when to hold aloof from a man and when to yield.

It would be time enough, when she had made her confession, to determine what she should say to Freddie, who was at present conveniently dumfounded by her sudden changes. If she could never regain her self-respect in his eyes, at least she could smother his contempt by discarding him as whimsically as she had taken him up. So his vanity would become her own protection.

"And you can do a surprising lot by looking people in the eyes as though nothing had happened."

Folding her cloak over one arm, she ran forward until the steep ascent to Poplar Ridge forced her into a walk. Behind her, the lights of Melby winked through the highest branches of the trees ; in front, a gleaming gate marked the beginning of the Newbridge estate. Looking down on the flat roof and tower of the squat, cruciform house, Gloria saw the paved courtyards sable in the far-stretching shadow and the broad, smooth water of the moat shining black or glinting with tiny ripples of silver as a rare breath of wind feathered the surface. From the gate-house to the river, the road stretched in a narrow white line ; the grey-blue undulating park was dotted with the cumbrous black shapes of cattle, which humped themselves erect at her approach ; and two young horses, drawing near to inspect the unfamiliar white figure, cocked their ears suspiciously and with a disapproving toss of the head turned and cantered away.

As far as her eyes could reach, all was Norman's kingdom ; and Gloria was filled with vicarious pride of possession. The stability of this great grey border-fortress brought a repose of spirit which the restless new-won wealth of the Kendalles could never achieve.

"And, when we're all dead, it will still go on," she reflected. "I see Norman's point : working and saving all his life, to hand the place on to his son. It was what happened after the South Sea Bubble. . . . So long as father doesn't bump along, trying to borrow money, I shall pick up the idea, . . . even if I *do* find things a bit sticky at times. The place . . . just living here . . ."

Already she seemed to look back on those four hundred years of unbroken tenure, soon she would take her place in the line and give birth to an heir who would carry on the succession. It was her triumphant answer to the fate which had thrown her on

a world of struggle and humiliation, to live by her beauty and her wits. Though she might have to wait until Norman had set his finances in order, before many years she would restore Newbridge to its old glories; the fame of her hospitality would outstrip that of her predecessors; the ascendancy of Newbridge, now first called in question by the arrogant undigested wealth of the Kendales and their like, would be re-established. In the middle of her shining dream-picture Gloria saw herself inspiring and controlling, a figure of ever undimmed radiance.

"Lady Cartwright . . . The Cartwrights of Newbridge . . ." the world would whisper. "They're the big people in that part of Gloucestershire; been there since the flood. The place used to be rather dull in the old days, but she's transformed it. She'd transform anything. A charming woman, ravishingly beautiful; half Spanish, I believe." . . .

Exchanging the stage for the auditorium, Gloria constructed speeches in her own praise until she noticed that she was still standing among the sparse trees of Poplar Ridge. Hurrying forward, she reached the outer edge of the moat as the light in the dining-room windows paled and disappeared. She was making her way to the gate-house when a side-door opened, and Norman himself came in sight. Gloria opened her lips to call out to him, but checked herself until she had time to see what he would do: as he lit his cigar, she threw her cloak round her; and, as he began to pace up and down, she moved to the shelter of a massive urn and leaned against it to watch him.

For twenty minutes he patrolled the courtyard with his hands locked behind his back and his eyes fixed on the ground or glancing up at the house.

"It would be nice if he were thinking of me, but I'm afraid he's only thinking how much it will cost to put in electric light," said Gloria to herself.

After twenty minutes he halted to toss the end of his cigar into the moat.

"I don't know why I'm standing here, getting stiff and cold," Gloria whispered, but she remained without moving. "It seems a shame to interrupt him," she decided.

The regular patrol continued until the side-door opened again and the butler came out. They spoke together for a moment, Norman looked at his watch and hurried indoors; almost at once a single bell began to ring.

"Prayers," exclaimed Gloria, as she moved away to the side of the house where the blue, red and orange of the chapel

windows were reflected, like a fading rainbow, in the moat. "I wonder how long he'll be."

Above the soft music of the organ she could hear the scrape of boots and the squeak of chairs on stone. Silence followed, and she caught the low murmur of Norman's voice as he began to read. Though she pretended to be vexed at waiting, Gloria found a relief in postponing their meeting for a few minutes longer; and, looking back, she realized that she had not called out to him because she was afraid to meet him.

"Or not quite ready just *then*," she reassured herself.

In spite of the reassurance, fear lingered as the honest explanation and, suddenly possessing her mind, warned her that henceforth she would always be afraid to meet him. Now at last she understood why in her descent from the wooded hill-top she had paused so often: when she fancied that she was hailing Newbridge, she must have been bidding it farewell! Thrown face to face with the same temptations, she had broken down. Were they already married, he might—for his own honour—fight a duel with Freddie, as Sir John had fought with the second Duke of Preston; he might bring her back for thirty years' imprisonment as Catharine Lady Cartwright had been brought back to live and die in silence. As he had been warned in time, he had only to bar his doors against her.

"He *couldn't*!" Gloria sobbed; but, in recalling the tragedy of the Romney Catharine, she did not forget that Norman, at a hundred years' remove, had defended his ancestor.

So Freddie was right, after all: they belonged to different ages and different schools. Lady Cartwright had seen it too; only Norman, made blind and stubborn by love, was prepared to fight for her, and she had taken away the inducement to fight.

"I can't wait any longer . . . *now*," Gloria gasped.

Turning away from the rich light of the chapel windows, she was valiantly resolved to come next day and to explain, plead, prevail. Norman would honour her frank confession, all the more because, if she did not choose to make it, he would never know.

"I *must* tell him, of course." She shivered at the memory of a recent divorce-case in which the wife had betrayed herself by murmuring her lover's name in her sleep. "He'd never forgive me." . . .

"He'll never forgive me now! He doesn't understand love! He's ashamed of it! He won't even write to me! . . . He's . . . hard and cold as marble." . . .

Without noticing where she was heading, Gloria had broken into a run and only stopped when she reached Poplar Ridge a

quarter of a mile east of the bridle-path through the woods. Footsore and panting, she changed her direction and plunged into the green tunnel, running blindly until she was arrested by a warning low whistle and looked up to find Freddie standing in front of her.

"I didn't want to frighten you," he explained. "My darling, I was wondering what *could* have happened to you."

The endearment—and the tone, half-caressing and half-possessive—stung her to madness.

"I've not been long," she snapped. "I ran nearly all the way, but it's a good distance."

"I was getting anxious. I oughtn't to have let you go alone. If anything happened to you . . ."

"I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

Her brusqueness checked the flow of his solicitude, but Gloria knew well that he dared not remain silent for fear of seeming offended. If she had run both ways, there had been ample time for a long leave-taking; he must be thinking that Norman had made a scene and tried to retain her, that there had been wild reproaches and urgent entreaties. . . .

"Did you fix a time with Norman?" asked Freddie indifferently.

"I had all my trouble for nothing. He was at prayers, and I didn't want to wait." . . .

Freddie looked at her searchingly and walked on in silence. The house was in half-darkness when they arrived, and Mrs. Kendaille had already gone to bed.

"You'll have a drink, something to eat?" Freddie proposed, as they came into the hall.

"No, I'll go straight up, thanks."

"A cigarette?"

"No, thanks."

"Let me come up to see that they haven't turned off all the lights."

"I can find my way up alone, thanks."

"But, Gloria . . ."

"Good-night, Freddie."

Throughout a restless night Gloria wove speeches of victorious explanation. In the morning, her mood of defiance had changed to chill uncertainty. So far from throwing her appeal to Norman before the stifling collective expectation of Melby

destroyed her, she had slept on till noon ; the tea by her bed-side was cold ; her muscles were slack, and her brain heavy.

After ringing for breakfast, she looked dully at the letters on her tray. A long outpouring from her father, alternately maudlin and violent, reproached her for their parting scene at Stratton : beside her ingratitude was ranged his long devotion, but the warning that she must behave very differently if she expected him to do anything more for her was weakened by the threat that, unless his circumstances mended, he would be unable to keep even his own head above water.

"As I do not choose to worry you with my own sordid cares," he wrote, *"I have not told you that, two days before leaving London, I again called my creditors together and obtained an extension of time. For reasons into which I need not enter now, it has been impossible for me to apply the whole of the sum already received to the satisfaction of purely commercial accounts ; and I should quite literally not have known where to turn if the lady whom you so wickedly traduced had not again insisted on coming to my aid."* . . .

"He writes like a fraudulent prospectus !"

Gloria was wondering if it was worth her while to go on reading when the question was answered for her by a gentle knock at the door. She had bare time to hide this last squalid reminder of the admiral's degradation when Freddie came in to enquire how she had slept.

"I ought to have been up hours ago," she replied, as she began her breakfast, "but I felt more dead than alive . . ."

"Why don't you spend the day in bed ?" he asked with the new soft-voiced solicitude which she found so irritating.

"I want to see Norman as soon as I can."

"Won't it *simply* upset you ?" he pleaded. "Gloria, don't think I don't understand. My dear, why do you imagine I came out to meet you last night ? Just to comfort you, if I could. When you couldn't speak to me, don't you think I understood ? Why torture yourself by going again ? Tell him by letter." . . .

"Tell him *what* ?" Gloria broke in coldly.

Freddie shrugged his shoulders, unwarned by the challenge in her voice :

"I can't dictate the letter. I should think if you said that, while it wasn't practicable for you to marry him . . ."

"D'you think this . . . *anything* makes any difference ?" she interrupted.

"Of course it does! You can't marry him now! Him or any one but me."

"Are you blackmailing me?"

"I'm not such a fool. And you're not so silly as to think that. Gloria, what's come over you? Look at *facts*. Good God . . ."

Breaking off helplessly, he stared at her; and the utter incredulity of his expression began slowly to daunt her.

"You won't see that I love Norman!" she cried. "I should never love any one else like that. When I marry him, I shall be faithful to him; but, if I had a thousand lovers, they couldn't affect my love for him. He's a saint! I love him with my soul not with my body . . ."

"But you won't marry him," Freddie interrupted.

"You think you can stop it?"

"I shan't try. You'll marry all the world before you marry Norman. Just because you love him. You daren't. Last night you thought you were strong enough to tell him everything and to marry him in spite of it all; but you weren't. And you're too fond of him to marry without telling him everything; you didn't know that till last night. Gloria, you could have waited ten minutes to see him if you'd felt equal to it. . . . You won't be equal to it this morning or this afternoon or tomorrow or ever. . . . You make me seem as if I were crowing over you when I only want to help you. *I've* always known you would never marry him; and, now that you're beginning to see it, I want to make things easy for you. I told you that I could afford to wait, pretending to stand aside. Write to him . . . Poor child, your troubles won't be over then, but perhaps I can help to make you forget them. What is it you want most in all the world? Peace, love? I can give you both of those. Everything that money can buy you shall have; and you know you aren't designed by nature to do without money (You'd ruin Norman in a week, but it wasn't that I was thinking of: it was the incompatibility, you'd get on each other's nerves, disappoint each other, madden each other till you'd broken your hearts and spoilt your lives). If you care about position, the whole *world* shall bow down before you. I know you don't love me as you love Norman, perhaps you never will; but I can make life tolerable for you. Try to look on that side of it, Gloria."

All the time that he was speaking, her head was bowed so that he could not see her face; and, when he had finished she still sat crumbling the toast on her plate.

"Oh, well," she sighed at length, "I suppose I shall never make you understand."

"I'll leave you to eat your breakfast in peace," he answered. "If you'd like a car . . . Oh, my dear, what's the good of this skirmishing?" . . .

"Why can't you give me *time*?"

Gloria suddenly found herself crying with the bewildered helplessness of a child; before she had begun to recover from the shock of realizing that she had lost Norman, the new shock of recognizing in Freddie the one inevitable alternative laid her prostrate again; as she struggled to her knees, it was always to remember that in their long contest he had beaten her; and, when he might have shewn her mercy unasked, he was insisting on an admission of defeat:

"A little courage now; this is when you need it! You'll find it so much easier if you don't try to resist."

"I must think!" she sobbed.

An arm stole round her shoulders and pressed her to him:

"There's nothing to think of."

"I've not said I'll marry you."

"But you will, Gloria."

"I love Norman and I don't love you."

"Try not to think of him; it will only make you miserable. The moment you've made up your mind, the moment we tell people . . ."

"You're not to do that! I shall deny it if you do!"

"The sooner you publish it, the better. Then you'll cease being torn in two; all your friends will write and offer you their good wishes; you *will* be happy, I swear. . . . I won't put it in the papers till you say you want me to, but I should like to tell my father at once. May I?"

With a struggle she broke free from his arms and turned away, burying her head in the pillows:

"Oh, I don't care *what* you do! Please go away! I want to be alone! Can't I even cry in peace?"

As the door closed, Gloria sprang out of bed and turned the key. So, until she chose to be disturbed, she could pour out all her misery unseen and unhindered. No one, indeed, attempted to come in; by Freddie's meticulous stage-management, the house and garden were silent as though all knew that her heart was lying dead. And, leaving nothing to chance, he was probably availing himself to the full of her precipitate licence to commit her with his parents.

"And, when I see them, they'll expect me to be ha-happy," sobbed Gloria with a gulp that threatened to throw her into hysterics.

It was more than time for her to compose herself ; and, after bathing her eyes, she set her hand to the hardest task that yet remained.

" *We have been such friends,*" she began, "*that I am writing to you first of all, even before my own father . . .*"

Her pen faltered as she thought of the crumpled letter that lay, still unread, half under one pillow. It was a mockery to affect solicitude for her father, but any letter to Norman must be a mockery. The memory of their hour in the afternoon sunshine on Newbridge tower convicted her of blasphemy when she casually degraded him to the ranks of her friends ; and, if it was hard for her to realize after long preparation that Norman had passed out of her life, for him it would be inconceivable. What had happened since that day a fortnight ago ?

"He won't believe it ! He'll think the world's upside down ! My God, if he comes here and tries to argue !"

" *What I am going to say,*" she began again, "*will surprise you very much, I am afraid ; I only hope that it will not hurt you too much. I have promised to marry Freddie Kendaile. He has been in love with me for years, and, though I could never love him as I love you (and I've told him so). . .*"

"Then why am I doing it ?" she asked herself. "And, anyway, why make things more difficult for the future by telling people that I'm not in love with him ? No one shall pity me. I'll beat them all : and Freddie shall pay the price." . . .

The prospect of future triumph made present explanation no easier.

" *What I am going to say will surprise you,*" she tried, "*and, before you let it hurt you too much, I want you to use all your imagination and sympathy. I cannot explain ; but, if you knew all, you would forgive all. I had a letter from my father lately in which I was informed that we were ruined. I use the word quite literally : it is a question whether he can avoid bankruptcy. At such a time we are no longer free to follow our own inclinations.*" . . .

"I suppose Dot or some kind friend at his club will tell him that bankruptcy is no new terror for father," she reflected, "but I can't help that. . . . The fraudulent prospectus ?"

The line once found, she followed it with a gusto that surprised

her. Dignity, self-sacrifice and resignation absolved her from regrets and self-pity ; at the end of six pages she had still kept aloof from explanations and apologies ; if the malicious charged her with marrying for money, at least the money was not for herself and Norman would be the first to defend her.

"And, after this, I don't think he'll want to argue," she whispered between her teeth as she sealed and stamped her farewell.

Time had sped by unregarded, and she was roused to the present by Mrs. Kendaille's voice at the locked door :

"My dear, I hope you're taking things quietly after all your fatigue. It's half-past one, and I've ordered you a little invalid meal. Just a wing of chicken and a pint of champagne. . ."

"But I'm coming down," Gloria called back. "Give me half an hour, dear Mrs. Kendaille——"

"Wouldn't it be wiser to stay in bed ? It's such a nice little meal I've ordered."

"I'm up already." After nerving herself to meet them all, Gloria could not give her courage time to cool. "I won't belong," she added, though in her new scheme others should wait for her or not as she chose.

"And I'll have their beastly champagne," she whispered to herself.

5

"I never seem to see the papers," said Gloria on the sixth morning of her visit. "Have you announced the engagement yet ?"

"I was waiting till you said I might," Freddie answered.

"I've nothing to stop you."

"I thought perhaps I'd better get in touch with your father first."

"There's not the slightest need : I'm of age. . . . No, I don't think there's any one I want to warn beforehand. I wrote to Norman, but he hadn't the generosity to answer."

"Perhaps it's as well," said Freddie with feeling.

The tone of gentle sympathy clanged in Gloria's hearing as a reproach. Norman, of course, was too much dazed to write. His love had been engendered of grief and born of loneliness : if he had cared less for his father, if his mother had cared more for him, he might never have felt a need for her ; and, when she had made him dependent on her sympathy, she was vanishing from his life. And Freddie must needs underline his desolation.

"If he really cared . . ." Gloria turned to the window, where she could continue to unburden her heart without having every change of expression scrutinized. The cruelty of her betrayal would be less intolerable if she could put some of the blame on Norman. "I wonder if he did, I wonder if I've been making myself miserable over some one I meant nothing to: every one always said it was Newbridge first and the rest nowhere. He hasn't even tried to see me."

"My dear, how could he? If you look at it the other way round, how could I drive up to Newbridge and engage him in battle for you?"

"If you cared for me a thousandth part as much as you pretend!" Gloria cried.

The flash in her eyes as she turned was a warning to Freddie that he would be wise to retire from the controversy. Under his observation and watchful tending, Gloria had gradually allowed herself to abandon the attitude of blank resignation which she reserved for the moments when they were alone together; the wild enthusiasm of his parents, who had cried with happiness on hearing of the engagement and presented her with a cheque for £1000 to help with her *trousseau*, went some way towards counteracting the dull apprehension of the hours in which she waited for sight or sound of Norman; and now, as she grew accustomed to her own choice and heard no word from the other side of Poplar Ridge, it was natural that regret and even curiosity should gradually be swallowed up in resentment. But the resentment had to be kept to herself. If Freddie knew as much about women as he pretended, he could be sure that, unless he fanned her dying love, she would come to hate Norman with all the bitterness possible to a woman who, after once loving, no longer loved and, in addition, believed herself to be slighted. Whenever she accepted or asked for anything that tended to enhance her dignity, he must be feeling that hatred was preparing its ground-works in jealousy and that, even while she outstripped Norman, she would seek a means of annihilating him.

"If we can fix on a date, we may as well include that in the announcement," Freddie proposed.

"Let's get it all over as soon as possible," she answered with a touch of the untamed brutality which she kept at hand for the periodical mortification of his self-esteem. "Why don't we all go up to London and take a flat for a month? It'll make all my shopping rather more bearable."

"We'll do that by all means," Freddie acquiesced obediently. "Do you want a big or small wedding?"

"Oh, small, for Heaven's sake!" cried Gloria, though she was resolved to be married at St. George's and to make the suggestion emanate, like so many others, from the family.

Thus, it was with an air of originality that Mrs. Kendaile told her three days later that they had secured a suite at Claridge's and hoped that Gloria would stay with them, while the wedding arrangements were set on foot.

Whether the announcement caused much stir none of them could tell. Gloria's photograph was published in the illustrated papers; but the accompanying letter-press gave a larger share of its inaccuracy to emphasizing the financial weight of the Kendailles than to admitting the social eminence of the Brittons.

"*Inset, Miss Gloria Britton, who is marrying Captain Frederick Kendaile,*" she repeated with bitter memories of her journey to Newbridge so many ages ago.

That she was beautiful and popular was the utmost satisfaction that Gloria could wring from the stereotyped phrases; and private congratulations confirmed the impression left by public comment: that she was doing very well for herself in marrying a rich man who had for fifteen years been one of the most eligible of bachelors as he had been one of the most elusive.

To Dot St. John, who asked in bewilderment what had overtaken her attachment to Norman, Gloria wrote vaguely: "*I'll tell you everything when we meet.*". . . To the friends of her own age, who enquired why she had so long put herself to the trouble of saying that she would never marry a man whom she could not trust, it was sufficient to hint contemptuously that she was bored by the pertinacity of Freddie's suit. To her elders she suggested that, if she had not come to his rescue, he would have sauntered away a rich and empty life, mute and inglorious. Already she heard rumours of the negotiations that were to waft old Mr. Kendaile into an assembly which he would never have strength or patience to attend; and she was revolving schemes for a public career which should make Freddie distinguished by something more than the possession of wealth. This, however, she was content to leave indefinite in outline for the present, while she concentrated her energies on a marriage whose display should lull her into forgetfulness of everything else.

In the midst of all her distracting preparations she still found time to be curious about Norman. Silence was perhaps the easiest reception for him to accord her; she had no justification for wanting to punish him; but, sooner or later, they must meet; and she dreaded the encounter. Apart from Dot St. John, whom she was in no hurry to see, there was no one of whom she could

enquire his whereabouts and no one who would volunteer them. Lady Cartwright, meeting her in the street, stalked up to say : " So you've taken my advice ! I *knew* you'd be sensible and I hope you'll both be very happy " ; but, when Gloria set her teeth and asked boldly whether Norman was at Newbridge, the answer was too vague to help her :

" I believe he is. Or perhaps he's in London. He and that man May-Kingston seem to live in each other's pockets : he thinks I'm frivolous and extravagant, and, though I'm his mother, I'm afraid I find him rather a bore." . . .

The wedding preparations went on apace : Gloria impressed the Kendailles and gratified herself with the long list of friends to be invited ; a temporary reconciliation with the admiral secured that he should give a reception at Claridge's and that Mr. Kendaille should pay for it as well as for the set of Russian sables which he was affecting to give his daughter ; a technical description of her dress and two lists of presents guaranteed the solidity of the union ; and only the irrepressible Dot St. John had dared to mention Norman's name.

Yet silence by itself was not enough to drive him from her mind. Morning after morning, as she acknowledged her presents, she hoped to find a romantic offering from Norman, with the brief valediction of a broken but forgiving heart.

" Good wishes. . . . Just two words ! " she cried on the night before her wedding.

6

Her heart hardened against him on her return from the church next day, as she ripped open the telegrams of congratulation and searched in vain for his name.

Though she had no right to expect generosity, this total neglect deranged her until she looked with a sinking sense of incompetence at the unknown or unrecognized procession that was filing through the doorway to compliment her. The exacting duty of introducing her friends to Freddie, the physical difficulty of keeping her smile elastic and the labour, none the less heart-breaking for being insuperable, of finding new expressions of graciousness for hackneyed good-wishes, robbed her of all sense of triumph. Deafened by shrill voices, flushed with the heat of the room and blunted in wit by repetition and banality, she only wanted to escape into silence and isolation.

" Carry on for a minute," whispered Freddie, " while I get you something to drink."

"I want a cold bath more than anything else," she exclaimed. "God, what would I not give for something to sit on!"

Her voice carried farther than she had intended; and, as Freddie worked through the crowd to the buffet, an elderly, bald man edged forward with a chair.

"Why not take this, Mrs. Kendaille?" he asked. "If you don't like to sit down, you can lean against the back."

"Oh, how kind of you! . . . You're standing with your back to the light so that I can't see your face . . ."

"You wouldn't remember me: we only met once, but John Kendaille's an old friend of mine. My name is May-Kingston."

Gloria's cheeks were already so much flushed that, though she felt her colour rising, she was consoled to think that no one would now notice it.

"But of course! I thought I recognized the voice. We met at Newbridge at the beginning of the summer."

"Quite right! Well, may I offer you all good wishes?"

Gloria smiled her thanks as she turned the chair and leaned against it. Imagination or some metallic quality, unnoticed before, in May-Kingston's voice warned her that he came as spy from the enemy camp; and she roused herself to deliver the first blow if indeed she could not with dignity refuse combat.

"Thank you so much! Lady Cartwright told me, I think, that Norman was working for you now."

"He's giving us a trial to see how he likes it."

"I hope he does well. It would be such a tragedy if he had to sell Newbridge. I've only stayed there that one time and I've not known him long, but I always feel it matters more to him than anything in the world."

"I think it does."

Again the voice sounded metallic, as though he were keeping something back. Gloria wished, defiantly, that he would say what was in his mind, or, impatiently, that he would leave her in peace.

"It would make a tremendous difference to us," she went on. "Norman is our nearest neighbour, and it would be very uncomfortable if some perfectly impossible man planted himself down there. I thought Norman would be here to-day, but I suppose you keep him too hard at work."

Frightened by her own audacity, Gloria turned away in the hope of finding some one else to engage in conversation, but May-Kingston remained stolidly immovable.

"Was he invited?" he asked. "He certainly didn't say anything about coming."

"Ah, that I can't say! My in-laws sent out the invitations; I just gave them the names of every one who'd congratulated me or sent a present."

"And you don't remember whether he was among them? I particularly wanted to see him."

"I'm afraid I don't," Gloria answered boldly.

She turned with relief as Freddie came cautiously forward with a glass of champagne. May-Kingston's artless questions and grudging scraps of information seemed to accuse her of betraying Norman; and, whether the accusation was justified or not, it was none of his business.

"Drink this, my dear; you've earned it," Freddie whispered. "And then you ought to be thinking about changing your dress."

"Your father tells me you're spending the honeymoon in Italy," said May-Kingston as he edged away. At the jerk of his head, Gloria looked up in time to see the admiral profiting by champagne for which some one else had paid. "Well, I wish you all happiness, . . . then and afterwards. Now I must get back to work."

"It was very good of you to spare time to come here," Freddie murmured.

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," answered May-Kingston.

As he disappeared into the crowd, Gloria muttered venomously:

"Old beast!"

"He's a harmless bore," Freddie answered in mild defence. "What did he say to ruffle you?"

"Nothing, but he's an old beast all the same. Why he ever came . . . Just to spy and sneer."

"No amount of spying and sneering can hurt us now," Freddie whispered, squeezing her hand. "Forget everything that happened before to-day."

"There's nothing to forget," Gloria rejoined, as, in spite of herself, her eyes followed the vanishing gleam of May-Kingston's bald head. "I suppose," she added in a whisper too faint for her husband's ears, "he's gone to tell Norman all about it."

BOOK TWO



CHAPTER ONE

IN THE WILDERNESS

"The only difference between a caprice and a life-long passion is that the caprice lasts a little longer."

—OSCAR WILDE : *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

I

As the Kendaille wedding-party scattered, Andrew May-Kingston threaded his way through a disintegrating army of over-heated women, who were still bright-eyed with sentiment, and over-dressed men, who were already flushed with untimely champagne. While he deliberated whether to make for his house in Cadogan Square or his office in Westminster, Mrs. St. John flung him an invitation to the vacant place in her car and turned his doubts into a determination that, whithersoever she was bound, he would be going in the opposite direction.

Her capacity for absorbing discouragement was greater than he imagined.

"If it's Queen Anne's Gate, I can drop you *easily*," she argued, "I'm half an hour late for a Shakespeare memorial meeting in Central Hall. Or your house. It's equally convenient. I've my French-theatre-in-London committee this afternoon. Chelsea. One must keep up with the times, though I'm run off my legs. Jump in and tell me what you think of it all."

"The wedding?" May-Kingston only accepted her invitation in the belief that, when other people were over-anxious to ask him questions, they usually let fall information of value. "A very charming ceremony! . . . I wasn't there."

"You were well out of it! I've never seen such a mob. If Gloria means to go on as she's begun . . . How long do you give it?"

May-Kingston sighed gently as he reviewed the ghostly brides and bride-grooms whom he had seen standing, like Freddie

and Gloria, on the threshold of enduring happiness. There must be successful marriages somewhere ; but his cynical companion seemed to shut her eyes and her front door to them with equal resolution. And, in his experience, even a successful marriage could be talked into failure by these chatterers who gave young people no time to adjust themselves.

"You know them both so much better than I do," he temporized.

The last month, nevertheless, had told him more about the young Kendales—at second hand—than he expected to hear of any man and woman so entirely unimportant. Lunching at his club, he was regaled with fantastic estimates of the Kendale fortune from the admiral, who was prepared to move into Freddie's London house at a moment's notice ; dining anywhere, he was given incredible confidences about the women who had flitted across the path of Freddie's life. Those who possessed no information seemed to manufacture it ; and May-Kingston was informed in alternate breaths that Gloria was going to live in Paris because her husband and father had combined to make London uninhabitable, that the admiral and certain of Freddie's unnamed friends were to be paid annuities on condition that they gave England a wide berth and, finally, that Freddie was for the first time in love and could be twisted round Gloria's finger. The old house in Davies Street was to be given up, its sinister history buried ; Freddie would divide his time between a parliamentary career and his local responsibilities in Gloucestershire ; he and his wife both wanted children ; and the marriage would be an unqualified success.

"I know them in single harness," said Mrs. St. John with knitted brows. "Freddie has a curious fascination for women and he likes to use it ; but I sometimes think he's right-down wicked. Life's a game he has to win ; and he likes cheating for its own sake. If I told you all I *knew* about the way he's behaved to some women, he'd be turned out of every club in London. . . . Not that he'd care. He despises other men because they don't have his success. Right-down wicked in every way. . . . Or so you'd say till you found him throwing over everything that amuses him for the sake of playing the piano to his father. He adores old John, even though he intrigues under his nose. Whether Gloria will be clever enough to control him . . . I don't understand Gloria."

"I've only met her for a moment," May-Kingston answered guardedly.

"How's Norman taking it ?" Mrs. St. John asked with a dis-

concerting speed of transition that made him thankful for his caution.

Norman's reticence about himself was so formidable that it was almost an impertinence to discuss him behind his back.

"I've no idea," May-Kingston answered. "It was at New-bridge that I met her . . ."

"I thought he was working for you."

"He is ; and we meet about once a month . . . on the stairs. Was he in love with this girl ?"

"Everything was *arranged* ! I remember Mary Cartwright coming to me . . ."

"In what kind of temper ?," interrupted May-Kingston. "Her statements rather depend on her mood."

"I know ; but Gloria told me the whole story . . . independently. She was desperately in love with him at that time. And she'd been refusing Freddie for years. Then she turns round in one night. . . . I . . . don't . . . know, . . . but I thought she'd behaved abominably," concluded Mrs. St. John with the air of a moralist rather than of a crazy seeker after scandal. "There was some nonsense about her not appreciating Freddie till he stood aside and offered to help Norman." . . .

"Well, I don't profess to understand the young people of your amazing world. Norman's certainly said nothing to me. . . . I'm afraid we're stuck in this queue for the rest of the afternoon. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll get out here."

Though he was a mile from Cadogan Square and two from his office, May-Kingston judged that he could not safely support a longer inquisition. When Gloria's engagement was announced, Norman had gone about as though he were to be executed at dawn. The news, propagated and embellished by the admiral, created a three-days'-wonder at the County Club ; and, for all his reserve, Norman's eye-lids flickered whenever her name was mentioned. Even a friend twice his age hesitated to seek his confidence ; but any one who cared for him or for the quality of his work must consider means of hustling him abroad till the shock had spent itself.

"At the same time, he's well out of that gang," the simple-minded contractor decided.

And the "gang" included the useless little person whose company he had just forsaken. A threadbare affection for Maurice St. John carried the May-Kingstons to Stratton Park once a year ; but for Dot and Mary Cartwright, with their sharp ears and long tongues, their restlessness and disillusion, he had no liking and little tolerance. An excuse was always found to keep

his own twenty-year-old daughter from mixing with them ; and, for the brief period when Norman was unmistakably in love with Gloria, older and older-fashioned people might look on with misgiving. Forty years of irrigation and railroad-construction in three continents, if they did nothing else for a man, indicated how much of the earth's surface remained to be set in order ; and the grandson of a labourer who had wheeled his own barrow in the Dilston ship-canal found difficulty in remaining patient with a social world where Mrs. St. John and Lady Cartwright grew haggard in keeping boredom at arm's length.

"I may be a vulgar, common fellow," he reflected complacently, "but I am *some* use to the world. So would Roy have been. And I'll turn Norman to useful account as soon as we've bound up his wounds a bit. Yes, dinner. I wish I wasn't quite so absent-minded."

For a moment he had forgotten why he was in Sloane Street rather than Queen Anne's Gate ; but, in thinking of Norman, he recollected that invitations were to be issued, parties arranged and something, in general, done to relieve the present strain. His forgetfulness was occasioned by the sight of a girl who darted across Knightsbridge, vanished into the crowd, appeared again and hurried towards Cadogan Square. The sunshine, striking through a spider's-web hat on to thickly coiled red-gold hair, caused May-Kingston to dismiss all thought of Mrs. St. John and to start in pursuit. The erect carriage and rapid walk were as unmistakable as the slim ankles and short skirt.

"Which I *still* maintain is too short," he muttered, "though Margery tells me I know nothing about it."

Observing without being observed, he watched his daughter pausing on the kerb to let a line of taxis pass. In front of the first and missing it by inches, a child was swung into safety and collapsed howling on the pavement. While a frightened nurse assured the passers-by indignantly that he would one day be run over and that it would serve him right, the girl addressed herself to the task of staunching his tears.

"No bones broken ? Then you mustn't cry !" her father overheard. "Men are only allowed to cry when *all* their bones are broken. Isn't that right, nurse ? I'll tell you what you *have* done ; you've made a dirty mark on your beautiful white coat. What can we do about that ? D'you think if we bought some violets and covered it up . . . ?"

Before the astonished nurse could intervene, the child had been whisked into a neighbouring shop, to reappear garlanded and smiling. Margery dried his cheeks, kissed him and, with a

parting wave to the nurse, was preparing to cross the street when her father laid a hand on her arm.

"Daddy! You *did* startle me!" she cried, with a sudden turn. "What are you doing here at *this* time of day?"

"Did you think you were being arrested for kidnapping?"

"I felt sure it was the people in the shop thinking better of it. . . . Daddy, *do* pay them for the flowers! I'd no money, and they wouldn't take my watch. They said they knew me, miss, all right, thank you very much. *Good-day*, miss."

"I should think every one within a three-mile radius of Cadogan Square knows *you*," said her father, with grim memories of discovering her a year before on the steps of the Hyde Park Hotel, feeding a starved cat, while a scandalized *attaché* from the French Embassy held a milk-jug and waited apprehensively to be recognized in his degradation.

"He had really rather lovely eyes. . . . But I'm afraid the nurse is unsympathetic," said Margery with maternal sagacity. "What are you laughing at, daddy?"

"I was wondering whether you'd ever find a stronger term of abuse than 'unsympathetic' and whether you'd ever find any one whose eyes weren't 'rather lovely' or 'so sad'. . . . Is your mother at home?" he asked, as they reached the house. "I want to talk to her. And then I must go back and earn some money, if I'm to pay for all your extravagances."

2

While Margery ran upstairs, her father sauntered through the hall to his study and stood contemplating a pastelle of his dead son. Had he been ungrateful enough to desire any change in his daughter, he could have wished that the likeness between the two had been less poignantly strong. Tidy the child's shining hair into a field-service cap; give her six inches in height and sixteen round the chest; and you would have Roy back again, blue-eyed, irrepressible, with that half-seen gleam of white teeth that made you think he must be laughing still, . . . wherever he was. . . .

"The din those children used to make. . . ."

Had the war ended differently in one respect, Margery would now be babbling out her adventure with the infant in the white coat and planning to waylay him at the same place next day. With immense solemnity Roy would then help her to found a league for the regeneration of unsympathetic nurses; they would

laugh over their nonsense until it was morally impossible for a man not to break in on them and find out why they were laughing. And then they would dash downstairs, three at a time, on their way to a theatre, only pausing to borrow money from the butler. No one else at 405 Cadogan Square ever had money; and Margery cherished a dark suspicion that the firm of May-Kingston, Power and Weston had lost its junior partners by an assassin's knife and that the melancholy retainer whisperingly described as 'Power-and-Weston' alone shared her father's guilty secret.

Old Power and young Weston had been dead Heaven knew how many years. The name of the firm had continued unchanged, though, if the war had ended differently, it might now be May-Kingston, Son . . . and so forth. . . . But that was neither here nor there. . . .

The house was very silent nowadays. Margie must be missing Roy every hour, though they had made a silly tacit bargain never to talk about him. When the news came, she fought for breath and then went for a walk by herself, returning with a gigantic Newfoundland; later, she had bought a Russian boarhound and a chow; and the Cadogan estate knew her escort as well as it knew her. The purchase of the dogs coincided with certain moods of loneliness; and, after once overhearing her talking to the Newfoundland when she fancied herself to be alone, her father forbore to tease her about her love of animals.

"Roy would never forgive me if he thought I was . . . getting blue-moulded," May-Kingston had to recognize. 'Blue-moulded' was a favourite word with Roy. "I suppose one laughs less as one grows older. The old interests aren't as strong."

It was strange to think that he could ever become indifferent to the great business which the family in three generations had fed with their blood. Its tentacles stretched over the world; its capital was to be reckoned in tens of millions, its workmen in hundreds of thousands. Moles and dams, railways and canals, coal and oil, with no one to look after them in the coming years. He had recognized the danger before hostilities began; it dawned on Roy in the first week of the war; and—there was no harm in saying it now—both were tempted.

"We shall be rather boiled if I get knocked out," was Roy's prediction, when they came to discuss the first appeal for men. "You'll have to shove Margie in, like the girl in Bernard Shaw. I don't in the least want to fight, but I can't pretend I shall be any use to you for years." . . .

After that, everything had happened . . . as, at the back of his unsleeping mind, May-Kingston knew it would happen.

And now, as Roy hated any kind of fuss, the only thing was to explore this perplexing breed that had come to maturity in the war; to play a substitute for the rest of the match. . . . Since the first days of the armistice, a stream of talent had been pouring into the sieve in Queen Anne's Street; the best of the young men were already on their way to rebuild the shattered places of Europe, to drill for oil in Central America and to set moving the suspended work of dams and docks. For their headquarters staff May-Kingston, Power and Weston still lacked the material of which field-m Marshals are made; but the senior partner had returned from Newbridge in a mood of optimism.

"You know my memory," he apologized, as his wife came into the room. "I've just escaped from young Kendaile's wedding and, before I forget it, I want you to do what you can for Norman Cartwright. He's rather bowled over, he'd have liked to marry this girl himself. If you asked him to dine . . . I knew it would go out of my head if I didn't tell you at once." . . .

"I'll give him a choice of nights," Mrs. May-Kingston promised; and her husband returned to his office with a mind washed clean, at least for the present, of Norman's very name.

It was forced back upon his notice a few weeks later when he was informed that every invitation had been refused, with an almost superfluous testimony of previous engagements. Norman was spending every week-end, it appeared, at Newbridge; he was included daily in at least one list of guests at a dinner or ball; and, to judge by his looks, he was successfully trying to tire himself out and wholly failing to forget his obsession.

"Ruining his health," May-Kingston reflected; "which doesn't suit my book or his. Afraid to face any one who has an inkling what's up. And shirking his main difficulty, which is that he'll have to live, broken heart or no, next door to these young people . . . unless I send him abroad." . . .

Drifting into the card-room of the County Club, he interrogated Gloria's father on the progress of her honeymoon. The admiral, however, was fiercely void of news.

"I'm to lead my life, and she'll lead hers," he announced. "After all I've done for her . . . If it hadn't been for me, where would she be now? Her poor old father's not grand enough for her now. You hear John Kendaile's taking a peerage? He is! Seventy-five; and one foot in the grave. I'll wager it's only to please Miss Gloria. No, I don't know where she is; and, until she begs my pardon, I don't care. Some day, perhaps, she'll be sorry. When she remembers all I've done for her . . ."

As the admiral's plaint threatened to develop circularly,

May-Kingston retreated and again forgot Norman's share in the Kendale tangle until reminded of it by the Birthday Honours' list. The formal announcement that a barony had been conferred on John Kendale Esquire for his services to finance and commerce was supplemented by a paragraph recalling the recent marriage of his eldest son : Captain and Mrs. Kendale, who had spent their honeymoon in Italy, were now on their way home and were expected, after a short stay in London, to settle in Gloucestershire, where the new peer had placed a wing of Melby Court at their disposal.

"And now I *must* have this out with Norman," May-Kingston sighed with more trepidation than he usually displayed in summoning the junior members of his staff into the private office on the top floor. "He can have his choice of countries," he added, to a wall-map of the world.

Norman's expression and carriage, as he stood to attention in the open doorway, were not encouraging to an exchange of confidences ; and May-Kingston tried to break down his guard by asking whether he could conveniently attend a conference that night and then informing him that it would open at eight o'clock at Cadogan Square.

"You won't dine with us for pleasure," he explained, "so I have to say I want to talk business."

"It's very kind of you." Norman gazed down through the evening sunshine on the dusty tree-tops of the Park, trying to conceal that his first impulse had been to refuse. "Isn't it rather short notice for your establishment?"

May-Kingston shook his head and rang for a secretary, as the vibrant note of Big Ben, striking seven, was borne through the open windows.

"We'll warn them to expect you. Sit down. I've seen hardly anything of you since you came here."

Though Norman turned his back to the west, there was enough light from the other windows to shew that his eye-lids were pink from want of sleep ; the eyes themselves, however, revealed a stubborn resolve not to give in.

"What time do you dine?" he asked, with patent anxiety to escape an interview that was no less patently being arranged for his spiritual and material benefit.

"Nominally at eight. Dress or not, as you like. Since Roy's death, we haven't entertained except for business. And that I hope very shortly to place on your shoulders. We must have a representative in London to entertain for the firm. It would mean a house in some place like Grosvenor Square ; and

you'd have an allowance of about £20,000 a year. I think you'd do it uncommonly well, Norman. First of all, though, you must study the business in the places where the work's being done. I want to suit your convenience, if I can : but I feel that, the sooner you get out of this country, the better. Truth to tell, I've thought so ever since I came back from that wedding. The Kendales'," he added, to leave his meaning in no doubt.

"Oh, you were there?" asked Norman steadily.

"Yes. It was the usual circus. D'you want to hear about it?"

"If there's anything . . ." Norman began with a show of indifference.

"No, my dear boy, you know quite well what I mean," May-Kingston interrupted, bullying for fear of being bullied. "We haven't discussed this, but I've made certain deductions. I went there in case you wanted a first-hand report from somebody whom I hope you can trust. Well, she's married; it's all over. To be brutal . . ."

"But this has nothing to do with my service abroad," Norman interrupted frigidly.

"I think it has." May-Kingston realized that his greater age was his only protection. "The problem of the moment is that your health is going to pieces. Well, the best remedy is hard work, of which I can always give you plenty." . . .

"I'm in your hands entirely."

"Good! As I've said so much, I'll add this; though I know you feel it's none of my business. In years to come, you'll probably meet Mrs. Kendaile. Not at present. She has an uneasy conscience; and with reason. I think she was fond of you; she may be fond of you still. Well, when you've seen as many girls as I have without a bob to bless 'emself with, you'll hesitate to judge them." . . .

"I'm not judging this one," Norman interrupted, though his thin lips and unwavering eyes—the deeper and more inexorable for their round setting of shadow—seemed already to be contemplating sentence and execution.

"Eight o'clock, then," said May-Kingston, trying not to shew that he was hurt by this chilling reception.

"And a short coat?" Norman waited for a moment longer and then looked at his watch, without choosing to see the hand which was being stretched towards him. "I'd better go and dress at once."

After an interview that had rasped his sensibilities like a blow on an unprotected nerve, Norman reflected that the drive from his rooms in King Street would have been less sombre if Cadogan Square had not always been associated in his mind with the atmosphere of suppressed grief. He had gone there the first time to describe Roy's death to an impassive father and mother who listened and put their questions as though he were giving evidence in court ; the second time was after his own father's death, and he had been taken in like a lost dog from the streets. The third time revived the desolation of the second and added a feeling of despair. Why could not these good people leave him alone ?

" Your name, sir ? "

Norman pulled himself together and strode, unannounced, into an empty room, while the footman murmured that Mrs. May-Kingston would be down in one moment. A Russian boar-hound rose with alacrity from the hearth and came forward to test the quality of the newcomer. Bending down to pat his neck, Norman stepped on a soft paw and turned apologetically to the chow that was trying to make friends with him from behind :

" I'm most awfully sorry, old man, but it really *was* your fault," he exclaimed. " Did I hurt you ? In future, if you'll shake hands where I can *see* you . . . Come on ! Shake hands ! And tell me what your name is." . . .

The collar was engraved with the words :

Miss May-Kingston
405 Cadogan Square
S.W. :

and Norman drew himself upright in perplexity. For weeks he had really not known whether he was asleep or awake, and it was necessary to give ' Miss May-Kingston ' her place. So far as he could trust his memory, he had never met her ; Roy had never mentioned her, but then he had not known Roy well. Was she a sister ? An aunt ? He looked about him and forced himself to stand very still : the room had changed, he must have come to the wrong house. Yet the man had said that Mrs. May-Kingston would be down in one moment ; he must be dreaming or mad. Certainly he had slept little of late. . . .

Norman was moving dizzily to the door, when it opened of its own accord and a somnolent Newfoundland ambled in. Then

the dark rectangle of the doorway was filled with a flash of apricot light ; and he found himself shaking hands with an unknown girl.

" Sir Norman ? Mummy'll be down in a minute ; she's been telephoning." Her smile unnerved him for a moment by its likeness to Roy's. " Do tell me : have you seen *The Lucky Tub* ? No ? That's excellent. We'd arranged to go to-night, and, when daddy said you were dining, we got another ticket. ' The most sumptuous revue in London ; a feast for the eyes ; one ripple of laughter from start to finish.' . . . The seats aren't all together, I'm afraid, but I think we shall be able to see."

" It sounds delightful," Norman answered. " But I feel a frightful intruder, butting in like this. You must really blame your father."

" I'm so glad he thought of it. Mummy said I might have a party, because it's my birthday."

" But why didn't your father tell me ? I've brought no present ! "

" Oh, he forgets everything about home when he's in the office. He's hopeless ! I sent him to Pelman, and he came back with a pair of spring dumb-bells. One day I called to see him, and he came downstairs with one of the other partners ; I didn't want to interrupt so I just bowed and let myself be seen and not heard. A moment later daddy whispered : ' And *who* is your young friend ? ' He's never quite lived that down." The story was rounded with a laugh which made Norman fancy for a moment that he was talking again to Roy. She had her brother's white skin, gently flushed ; his sapphire-blue eyes and straight nose ; his voice and laugh, all inherited, presumably, from their mother, before she was turned to stone. " I forgot to tell you The drawing-room is being repainted, so you had to be shewn in here. This is my room. You don't mind ? "

" Not now that you've told me. I thought for a minute I'd come to the wrong house. Are these your dogs ? "

" Yes. If you're fond of dogs, you must come and stay with us at Beetham. (Four miles from station. Splendid train service. Hooting and shunting. Company's water). I've a police-dog there . . ." She paused as Mrs. May-Kingston came into the room. " Mummy, do introduce us ! We're getting on so well ; and I want Sir Norman to meet Diogenes. . . . We *really* ought to go down : I couldn't bear it if we were late. . . . Oh, *here's* daddy."

Norman found himself a little out of breath as he went down to dinner ; but Margery's effervescence subsided in the presence

of her parents, and in the long silences between the forced spurts of conversation his mind went back resentfully to the late interview in May-Kingston's private office. Intolerable impertinence. . . . The Kendailles were probably dining now . . . at Pontresina . . . or Assisi ; they had flown to Paris and flown on to Italy ; now they were returning. So, at least, the newspapers had announced ; and Norman still found it strange that he must follow Gloria's movements in the press. If only he could begin to understand . . . But he had promised himself to give up puzzling over something that was ended : an incoherent letter, falling from space, to tell him that she was marrying some one else. If she could play him such a trick, why should she have pretended to love him at all ?

When his glass had been filled for the last time, he raised it to Margery.

"May I . . . wish you many happy returns of the day ? " he asked abruptly.

"Thank you ! Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking . . . " she began.

"We've hardly time to let you get started," her father interrupted. "By the way, have any sandwiches been ordered ? What kind do you fancy, Norman ? "

"A very thin slice of cheese, with plenty of mustard," Norman answered. "But I think, sir, I ought to go straight home after the theatre."

"You shall please yourself, but we'll order you your favourite vice in *case* you come back. You heard that, Margery ? Plenty of mustard. Now tell me what mischief you've been up to all day."

An eager torrent of trivialities gushed gaily forth until Mrs. May-Kingston went to fetch her cloak. Norman was dispensed from talking, almost from listening, though his attention was caught from time to time by a phrase or intonation that seemed to drag Roy from his grave at Armentières. At such a moment, the father and mother wrapped themselves in deeper silence ; and, towards the end of dinner, the silence seemed once more to chill the girl's volubility.

"They're not giving her a particularly cheerful birthday," Norman reflected, as she slipped out of the room in search of tickets.

"Is the car here ? " asked May-Kingston, on her return.

"Yes. And I've told Power-and-Weston about the sandwiches. And mummy's coming in a minute," Margery answered. "I think she wants to see you, daddy." As her father left the

room, Norman was preparing to follow him when she waved him back into his chair and pulled the tickets from their envelope. "They won't be down for a minute, so you can finish your port. . . . A 13 and 14; and B 4 and 5. 'I can recommend them confidently, miss: some of the best seats in the 'ouse.' . . . I . . . told you we should have to divide up, didn't I? Sir Norman, will you be frightfully bored if I ask you to sit with me? Birthdays and Christmas and things of that kind always upset mummy rather. And, when she's like that, I'm no good: she still thinks of me as a baby." . . .

Norman extinguished his cigar and opened the door for her:

"If we wait for them outside. . . ."

"Why? Oh, so that they won't have to face the light? D'you know, I never thought you were that sort of person! But you're not to bother about me. . . . Isn't it rot that they won't let you take dogs to theatres?"

4

They reached their places in time to observe a street-scene in Spain giving place, with a final flurried rattle of castanets and a last defiant stamp of the Andalusian *prima donna's* heel, to *The Beach, Hawaii; Present Day*. The orchestra, at one authoritative tap, interrupted its rendering of *Seville Sunshine* in mid-bar and, at another, rollicked into the rich syncopation of

*"West—due—west—for a thou-sand—miles or so
There—are—girls—with a thou-sand—smiles or so. . . ."*

The mannequins who had languidly undulated a moment before across the *Show-room at the Magasin Chic* reappeared in kilted skirts, nut-brown fleshings, barbaric ornaments of coloured beads and tossing manes of short black hair, to hold the stage with their lilted description of moonlight in Hawaii until the principal comedian had discarded his mock-matador finery for the sober uniform of the League of Nations Mandatory for the Pacific Islands.

"Some day . . . I want you . . . to come and see me . . . quite alone," Margery confided shyly, with a cautious glance to see that she was not being overheard. "I want you to talk about Roy; and I can't with them. . . . You see, there were just the two of us; and we did everything together and talked everything over. It brings him back, to think of him." . . .

"I'll come whenever you ask me."

"Thank you ! . . . Have you many brothers and sisters ? "

"None at all."

"How funny ! . . . I mean you've always been alone. I suppose you don't know . . ."

"What it feels like to be lonely ? One can be . . . solitary, I imagine."

As he looked round to see who was in the house, Norman caught sight of his mother in a box with the St. Johns and the latest of her middle-aged Anglo-Indian sympathizers. Their eyes were upon him ; and he found himself blushing in anticipation of his next meeting with Lady Cartwright. "*Who's your little friend, Norman ? Pretty child. Has she any money ? Oh, but she's an heiress ! I told you to find out if the May-Kingstons had a daughter.*" . . . He tried to concentrate his attention on the stage ; but Margery was leaning forward, with one leg crossed over the other and her hands folded in her lap ; he could not help looking at the heavy coil of red-gold hair, the slender neck and dainty profile. As they went to their seats, he had seen heads turning to watch her : others, then, thought her pretty, but she was hardly more than a child, touchingly forlorn and desperately anxious to please.

At the end of the first half, she turned her dark eyes upon him in misgiving :

"I do *hope* you're not bored. If you see any friends you'd like to talk to . . . I wish it wasn't *quite* so hot."

As she loosed her cloak, Norman leaned across and laid it on the back of the seat. A warm scent of June roses, stinging-sweet and faint as the memory of a dream, brushed his senses and was gone ; but the atmosphere with which she surrounded herself, sweet and fresh as that fragrance of roses, remained to protect her.

"I'd much sooner stay and talk to you. What have you been doing since you gave up the hospital at Beetham ? " he asked.

"Well,—I know you won't laugh—I've been trying to get myself educated. . . . 'Special attention for delicate and backward children. Hockey, riding, Church of England. Terms on application.' Daddy found that I was suffering from arrested development. . . . You see, I was never at school and I've never met people. When I had Roy, we didn't seem to want any one else. . . . Mummy's taking me abroad this winter to put *some* kind of polish on me ; and I'm not coming out till next year. By that time I hope to have learnt something. . . . Now, could you honestly say where Hawaii was ? "

"We've jumped to the Winter Garden Hotel, New York,"

Norman answered evasively, with a glance at his programme. "I've a vague idea where that is."

"And I suppose we mustn't talk," she whispered, with a note of regret that flattered him. "Just tell me when we're going to have our dinner together."

"You don't think your people would mind?"

"Oh, they let me do anything. '*The Cabaret Club, Rio*,'" she read out, as a back-cloth representing Atlantic City, B.C. 1000 was rolled away to reveal the conventional gilt chairs and round tables of a stage night-club, the palms and flowering shrubs, the bare-backed chorus and their immaculate partners. "This is the end, I suppose; no *revue* is complete without a night-club finish. I was wondering whether Saturday night would be possible for you."

"I'm afraid I shan't be in London."

"Oh!" A wistful note of disappointment made him realize that his refusal had been needlessly uncompromising. "Week-ends are the best time for me."

"If you'll ask me some time later . . ."

"But I don't want to put it off," she pleaded. "What's the first free day you have?"

Though he affected to weigh his answer, Norman felt that this one concession must not be denied her:

"I really don't know why I shouldn't come on Saturday," he replied. "Newbridge can get on without me for one week. It's only fair to warn you, though, that I can't tell you much about Roy: I saw very little of him."

"Still, you were his friend; and that makes me want you to be my friend."

"I should like you to feel I was already."

"You are. . . . Thank you. . . . I'm glad."

As the last note of *God Save the King* died away, to be followed by a rapid medley of the leading rag-time airs of the *revue*, Norman helped her into her cloak and waited in the gangway until they were joined by her parents

"Now, about those cheese-and-mustard sandwiches?" began May-Kingston. "Is it too much out of your way?"

"I should like to come for a moment, if I may," Norman answered. "It was a very good show, don't you think?"

"Very," agreed May-Kingston, who had watched it as little as his interlocutor.

An hour later, Norman walked slowly back to King Street. The excitement of the evening had ebbed out of him, and his rooms were filled with the shadows that had haunted him for

the last month. Before his eyes there rose a vision of Kendaile and Gloria, smiling, coquetting, embracing; and for the first time he lacked strength of will to drive it away.

"I'd better clear out of this for a bit," he muttered. "May-Kingston's quite right, . . . though it was intolerable impertinence. He must find me something to do abroad."

A sleepless night produced a marked reaction.

Instead of climbing to the private office, Norman headed obstinately for his own room and settled industriously to his own work until he should be ordered to Persia or Mexico. From his employer's judgement there was no appeal; but, so long as he could stay or go at pleasure, it was cowardice to run away from an awkward meeting. Neither the Kendales nor any other newcomer should force him to abdicate; neither Gloria nor any other woman should make him forget that, beyond his own brief, troubled existence, there stretched, behind and in front, the life of Newbridge. His duty, first clearly seen when he examined the estate accounts after his father's death, was to employ his stewardship in freeing the inheritance from encumbrance so that his son and grandson should live in a style denied to himself.

In August the Kendales returned to England. Norman had sacrificed two or three week-ends to amusing Margery when her parents were out of London; but the widely proclaimed announcement that Freddie and Gloria were on their way to Melby required him to decide whether he was afraid to enter his own house. Lady Cartwright, meeting him in the street, asked the question without waste of finesse. May-Kingston talked again of work abroad.

"I propose to arrange one or two little shooting-parties, if you can spare me," Norman answered. "I hope you'll come to the first. I know you always leave these things to Mrs. May-Kingston and Margery; may I discuss dates with them?"

"I'm sure we shall be delighted to come," May-Kingston replied.

5

On that word, Norman set out for Cadogan Square with the invitation in his pocket.

Eighteen months had passed since he was discharged from hospital; two years since his father's death. It was possible now to reckon the upkeep of Newbridge in reliable figures; and Norman calculated that he could open the house for two months in the shooting season and retain one wing for his own use

throughout the year. When Lady Cartwright's jointure expired, he could begin to set the place in order, though his agent talked hopelessly of "thirty, forty, fifty thousand; war-prices; the worst possible time for building." Before that, if he satisfied May-Kingston, there would be a substantial salary to apply. It could be done. It *should* be done, however long it took, however many reasons Lady Cartwright and May-Kingston and the Kendailles found for discouraging him.

"If I could only rescue a childless millionaire from under the wheels of a motor-bus . . ."

He was still wavering between exact calculations and a day-dream unfettered by probability, when he found himself in Cadogan Square. Since his first dinner with Margery, her house had been made the destination of an almost daily walk between the office and his club. Though he never felt wholly at ease with young girls, she gave him no time to be shy; and the least vain of men might have been flattered by the friendliness of her welcome. Until she grew up, he was in no danger of repeating his tragedy with Gloria; and, when he could cease thinking about himself, he was touched by the confidence with which she installed him in her dead brother's place. Life must be tolerably dull for her, with a mother who sat on philanthropic committees all day and a father who was always at his office, but she seemed to be blessed with an inexhaustible spirit of enjoyment. And it was amusing to tease some one whose simplicity of mind was only matched by her sweetness of temper.

"You all alone?" he asked, when he had picked his way over the forms of three recumbent dogs. "I came to fix a day for the Newbridge party."

Margery fetched an engagement-book from her writing-table and joined him on the sofa:

"You won't expect *me* to shoot, will you, Norman dear? I'm terribly good on a range, but I'd rather die than kill anything. . . . Let's see. We're going to be away most of October and November." . . .

"You must spare me a week-end before that, or you may never see Newbridge. If your father really means to send me abroad . . ."

"I hope he won't, Norman. I shall miss you terribly."

"And I shall miss you. Are you going to be 'finished'?"

"Yes. 'Stage and ball-room dancing taught. Curtsey for presentation.' My dear, you won't know me when I come back."

"If I see any change, I shall refuse to know you."

"Oh, Norman, why?"

"Because you're perfect as you are."

Both blushed at the awkward first compliment that had ever passed between them; and Margery busied herself with the engagement-book:

"You mustn't let daddy send you away before I go, or I shall have no one to play with."

"I should have thought your dogs were a whole-time job, though I confess I never know how girls *do* get through their days."

Margery stroked the head of her Newfoundland and smiled a little wistfully. The early mornings were delightful, for she could always ride in the park and banter her father at breakfast. If he was not too busy, they walked together to the office in Westminster; otherwise, she watched her mother giving orders and received lessons in plain cooking. Luncheon was always a confused committee-meeting, at which overdriven women spread nets for Mrs. May-Kingston's charity; and in the afternoon Margery had her singing and French conversation. After tea, at least during the last month, she had formed the habit of changing her dress and reading by the open window of the drawing-room, the telephone within reach if Norman should suggest taking her to a play, her eyes wandering to the square till the last possible moment for a call.

"Daddy's just joined Hurlingham," she answered at a tangent. "I'm going to play tennis there when I'm good enough. D'you think you'll ever be able to help me in getting up a four? I don't seem to know anybody. In the old days I was always sort of adopted by Roy's friends. And so many of them have been killed." . . .

"You'll meet all the people you want as soon as you begin going to parties," Norman assured her.

"I suppose so. *More* than I want, perhaps. But it won't be the same. . . . You're staying to dinner, aren't you, Norman?"

Though he had no engagement, Norman found it necessary to excuse himself. This unfortunate question of going away had made them both rather sentimental. If he stayed any longer, Margery would be sure to repeat how much she would miss him, and he would again remind her of the glorious times they had spent together during the last month. They would become more sentimental, and that was unfair to her and to her parents; he was welcomed to the house on the tacit assumption that he was old enough to be Margery's middle-aged uncle.

"Though I'm only twenty-six. And she's getting on for twenty." . . .

Walking rapidly down Knightsbridge, Norman decided that

he could not safely go back to Cadogan Square until he had thought out his relations with the family. If Mrs. May-Kingston broke her habitual silence to say : " I think, perhaps, it would be well if young Cartwright didn't come here *quite* so much, Andrew. You know what girls are ! They get ideas . . . , " well, he would prefer to retire before he was ejected. At the same time, it seemed shabby to set his own dignity above the undoubted enjoyment which the child derived from their little jaunts together ; and he could not pretend that he would not miss the daily delight of finding Margery curled waist-high in dogs, like Mowgli drowsing with his head on Bagheera's black skin.

" We'll see how things look in . . . a month's time," he decided ; and for a month he abandoned Cadogan Square in the afternoons and played squash-racquets at the County Club.

CHAPTER TWO

MILLENIUM

"To forget a wrong is the best revenge."

—*Italian Proverb.*

I

NORMAN'S four weeks of self-denial would have lengthened to six if he had not taken a short cut from Chelsea one evening and passed the May-Kingstons' house on his way to dress for dinner. On entering the square, he noticed an interested group on the pavement and was alarmed for a moment to find Margery bare-headed in the middle. Anxiety changed to amusement when he discovered her conversing sunnily with the driver of a pantechnicon and supplying his horses with water from a bedroom basin.

"I love that part of Surrey," she was saying. "Are you going back there to-night? Oh, poor horses . . . in this weather! Isn't there anything else they'd like?"

Norman wormed his way into the crowd and relieved her of the basin.

"Porridge and kidneys and bacon are a good preparation for a journey," he suggested. "What *are* you doing, you ridiculous child?"

"Hullo! . . . They looked so thirsty, poor darlings. . . . Are you coming to see me? You're quite a stranger, Norman."

Waving a friendly farewell to the smiling driver, she led the way upstairs. As the front-door closed behind them, Norman was seized with disabling shyness.

"I've been . . . extraordinarily busy," he answered at length. "What have *you* been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing much. . . . At least . . . oh, Norman, a friend of daddy's took me to see a film being made. I *must* tell you about that! And I haven't seen you since the dog-show, have I? We had an honourable mention there. And the flower-show. I've told you about my blue garden at Beetham? I've found a

blue rose for it ! It's perfectly hideous, and I don't believe it will do a bit well ; but I had to have it. I've ever so much to tell you. Now, you're going to stay to dinner, aren't you ? I'll tell Power-and-Weston." . . .

" But I'm not dressed ! "

" *That* doesn't matter. I'm all alone. I've been meaning to ring you up, but I was afraid you might be tired of dining with me."

" If I hadn't been so busy . . . ," Norman began. Then he paused to note a shadow of wistfulness darkening the blue of her eyes before she turned to look out of the window. The evening sun, shining obliquely across the square, made an aureole of her red-gold hair and fell on a faint hollow under her eyes and a new sharpness of outline in her bones. " Margie, have you been doing too much ? " he asked. " You're looking tired."

" I've not been sleeping very well." The slim white figure remained rigid for a moment, then walked to the side of his chair. " Norman, will you answer me one question ? " she asked with a quaver of indecision. " Have I . . . done anything to annoy you ? "

" My *dear*, no ! " Norman sprang up and caught her hand. " What *can* have put that idea into your head ? "

" Oh, it's all right, then. . . . When you suddenly left off coming to see me . . . Every one says I *do* talk too much, and daddy will tell you I always speak first and think afterwards." . . .

" And it doesn't occur to you that people like teasing you ? "

" But I'm such poor sport ! Daddy told me yesterday that he'd thrown an ink-pot at one of his secretaries and killed her. He was so serious about it that I quite believed him. . . . If we're still friends, you'll have to shew it by staying to dinner."

" I should love to. . . . Margie dear, you didn't *really* think I was sulking ? "

" I didn't know. . . . I missed you terribly. . . . And it worried me." . . .

Looking down on the violet-shaded eyes, Norman was appalled to think that any one should have lost her sleep through his clumsiness. And yet, if Margery took his absence so much to heart, he had been wise to stay away. If May-Kingston said to him : " I don't know what you've been saying to that child of mine, but you've succeeded in making her very fairly miserable . . . " A late interview in the private office had shewn that the senior partner was not afraid to be blunt of speech.

You *couldn't* annoy me if you *tried*," Norman assured her.

"Though why you should think it matters two pins whether I'm annoyed or not . . ."

"Because you've been such a saint to me!" Margery cried in throbbing gratitude. "All this summer . . . I can't talk to mummy; she changed's so much; I feel sometimes that she'll never smile again. And daddy's always thinking of something else. I don't know what I should have done without you."

"I don't know what I should have done without you," Norman answered.

For a moment the words seemed to be an echo; then he recognized them as a confession. Margery had been a charming distraction; and, though he was not in love with her, he had missed her. At the same time, if May-Kingston called him to account, he would have no defence.

Was any defence required? If he and Margery *were* in love . . .

The sight of her bent head filled him with a vaulting sense of power. Margery was old enough to marry. If she married from the nursery, he at least had no reason to be ashamed of what he offered her. If she was inexperienced, he could teach her the part she had to play. Forgetting the familiar lines of her room, Norman saw her in imagination at Newbridge and posed her in frame after frame. With her looks, her disposition, her charm, she would never disgrace the house or the name. Docile and devoted, she would be a tender wife and a loving mother. When he had educated her, she would shed fresh lustre on Newbridge.

Strange that he had never before thought of her in that way. . . .

"I was afraid you might have gone abroad," she murmured.

"Without coming to tell you?"

"No, I didn't think you'd do that. I don't know which I dreaded more: hearing you'd gone or finding you'd come to say good-bye. I know daddy wants some one to take charge in Belgium." . . .

"He talked to me about that."

"He *must* find some one else!"

Neither remembered clearly what happened after that. There was a phrase about not going if she wanted him to stay; a phrase about wanting to stay, to stay always. Margery flushed with pleasure when she realized that she had regained her playfellow, then stared in amazement as a discord of broken sentences conveyed that Norman wanted to marry her. He was really rather terrifying at that moment, as though he wanted

to eat her. Margery needed time to think ; but he was suffering, and his eyes hurt her.

She remembered putting up her hand to cover them ; and, at the touch of her fingers, Norman threw his arms round her and squeezed the breath out of her body. Between his kisses, he was begging her to say she would marry him. She remembered saying 'yes', because there was nothing else to say. Then he let her go. They stood apart, wondering what they had done, how it had all begun. Then Norman collapsed into a chair and sat with his face hidden in his hands.

For an hour the distant rumble and hoot of traffic floated by unheard ; the orange glow of sunset faded imperceptibly, and the room filled slowly with faint grey shadows. Mechanically caressing her wrist, Norman crouched with bent back, breathing with a fitful deep quiver. Any one who saw them might have fancied that he was under sentence of death ; but Margery, after a long, puzzled stare at his labouring shoulders, waited until a slamming door in the square roused him.

"I must tell Power-and-Weston about dinner," she whispered.

Norman stood up and walked to the fire-place without looking at her :

"In a minute." He pillowed his forehead on one arm and stared dizzily at the gleaming fire-irons. "There's one thing I must tell you before we go any farther. I don't think it's to my discredit." . . .

As he hesitated, Margery stole behind him and took his disengaged hand :

"Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

"You ought to know."

"Perhaps I do. . . . You've been very unhappy, haven't you, Norman? That's what's made you so sweet to me. I thought at first it was your father's death ; but it can't be that, or you wouldn't feel you had to tell me. . . . Are you trying to say that you once loved some other woman? Well, don't ! I don't want to know who she was ; I should only hate her if I thought she'd made you miserable, and there's no point in hating people. If you're happy now, that's all that matters. I don't want to know."

He turned and caught her in his arms :

"God bless you, Margie !"

"I suppose I've known from the beginning," she mused. "Do you remember when you first dined here? I came down from mother's room, feeling that there was a great black cloud there ; I came into the dining-room and found another cloud

Vindication

there. And then . . . I suppose it was at the theatre : I felt we were both terribly lonely and some one had brought us together to see what we could do for each other. I suppose I must have begun to love you then, but I always felt you must think me so terribly . . . raw." . . .

" Margie ! It was God who brought us together ! "

2

That night, May-Kingston sat silent for the length of two cigars.

Norman had insisted on breaking the news the moment that he came in. There was a half-heard gasp from Mrs. May-Kingston ; Margery asked whether she should leave them and, receiving no answer, stayed mute and motionless in her corner while Norman stated his case, delivered the plaintiff's and the defendant's speeches, summed up, repeated his summing-up and left the verdict to a frigid tribunal of one.

The silence was unnerving. Neither mother nor daughter had ever seen May-Kingston chilling the enthusiasm of imaginative young men who invaded his office with still-born schemes for canalizing the Sahara or linking the headwaters of the Rhine and Danube. Norman spoke almost dejectedly ; his hesitation lengthened ; finally he moistened his lips and muttered :

" That's all I have to say, sir."

May-Kingston looked at his watch and rang for a taxi.

" A [thing] like [this] can't be decided in a moment," he announced.

Then, as Margery and Norman walked softly into the hall, he raised his eyebrows for a moment at his wife and lighted a third cigar.

Now that the news had come to them, both felt that they had been vaguely expecting it. Norman had been less unnaturally old these last few weeks ; Margery, until a relapse that could only be explained by his sudden defection, had recovered her former effervescence. To see them playing together was almost to fancy that Roy was back and that Norman had never struggled in the toils of an ambitious young woman who left him for a better offer.

Nothing, however, could have been expected so soon. Though Margery was undeniably in her twentieth year, she was too young to think of marrying yet. They could be trusted together. And it was not seemly for a man to have two grand passions in the same summer.

"That's what I want to know," May-Kingston murmured. "They like chattering to each other, but has Margie any idea what marriage means? Is she just in love with love? And Norman. . . ?"

Everything else could be left out of account. Norman was a gentleman; and, if he had been ready to marry Gloria without a penny, he could not be unduly glamoured by the thought of a rich wife. And yet it was unfortunate that, when the young Kendailles were making their impressive first appearance at Melby, Norman should be preparing to confront them heart-whole, triumphant and the successful suitor to a considerable heiress. Was it love or self-love? And Margery? Was there much difference in her mind between a proposal of marriage and an invitation to dinner?

Outside, in the hall, Margery was advancing to the door and drawing back as soon as her fingers touched the handle. At last she nerved herself to enter, with a breathless whisper that she had come to say good-night. Mrs. May-Kingston recalled that, an hour before, she had seen a new light in the child's eyes; it was gone now; and, with a dull pain at her heart, she opened her arms.

"This is . . . rather a surprise to us," she explained.

"It was a surprise to me. Norman said he might be sent abroad, and I felt I couldn't bear that."

"And so that convinced you that you must be in love with him?" May-Kingston enquired with faint irony.

"No one would ever believe how sweet he's been to me," Margery answered dreamily.

"And he is . . . the first man you've met since you came out of the nursery. . . . Well, as I told him, these things can't be decided in a moment." . . .

"But why not, daddy? Oh, you must! It's so unkind to him." . . .

"Do you fancy you're in love with him, Margie?"

"I *know*! I've never been *happy* till now! When he told me, . . . I couldn't believe it. You *must* say 'yes'. We'll wait, if we have to; we'll do anything." . . .

"You'll go to bed now," May-Kingston interrupted gruffly. The urgent, pleading 'we' warned him that Margery was already advancing into a life from which they were half excluded. He was face to face with a generation which he did not understand. "We'll have another talk about this in the morning," he continued, but Margery was already half-way through the door. As on the day when Roy's death was reported, she struggled for

breath and then hurried through the hall. Three dogs rose and followed the flutter of her skirt upstairs. Though the sound was almost too faint to carry, her father fancied that he could hear a key turning. "She doesn't mean it, but of all the damned hitting below the belt . . ." he muttered. "I don't know what we're to say. Tell 'em to wait a couple of years?"

"I never think long engagements are fair," Mrs. May-Kingston objected.

"I never think it's fair to spring these responsibilities on a man. I should like a few children of other people to practise on."

At breakfast next morning Margery's place was empty. Her maid reported that she had gone out shortly after seven o'clock; and, as May-Kingston drove to his office, he sighted her returning through the Green Park with her usual escort. He was relieved to observe that her dogs still numbered only three: a fourth would have argued greater mental suffering than he cared to contemplate.

"Though I've no idea when the working day of a dog-fancier begins," he reflected.

Stopping the car by Buckingham Palace, he got out and made her walk with him for the rest of the way.

"We never had that talk," he reminded her.

"I didn't see what we could talk about. I believe you *will* say 'yes', but, daddy darling, if you don't, I can't ever talk about it. What *good* . . . ? I don't know what you're waiting for."

"I want to be certain that you young people know your own minds."

"I do."

May-Kingston walked upstairs without answering. If he could feel as sure of Norman as Margery was sure of herself, he would very soon cure her of walking about the park with a face of woe that would draw tears from a stone. Throughout a morning that should have been devoted to an estimate for clearing the Belgian war-zone of barbed wire, he was haunted by the heart-rending change which he had brought into Margery's radiant eyes; and at noon, abandoning all pretence of work, he summoned Norman to his room and invited him to luncheon.

"I told my wife you'd telephone if you could come. You mustn't build anything on this, you know," he added in a voice that seemed unnecessarily brutal.

"You won't keep me waiting longer than you can help," Norman answered a little huskily, holding himself as erect as if he were at a court-martial.

May-Kingston saw that his face was white and drawn as in the days when Gloria Britton's engagement was first announced. The fellow was pathetically young, though that made the problem no easier ! He remembered, too, that, until twelve hours before, he himself had been considered a good judge of character.

"What will you do if I say 'no'?" he asked. "You can sit down."

"I must wait till Margery's of age," Norman answered without moving.

"You won't try to steal her first?"

"Obviously not."

"Such things are done," May-Kingston observed drily.

"By people who've eaten your salt?"

"I believe so. . . . Well, we're safe for a time, then. And, if we still say 'no', when she's of age?"

"She'll be her own mistress then."

"She won't have a penny."

"I've not asked for a penny."

May-Kingston's eyes strayed involuntarily to the wall-map which he and Norman had so often studied together :

"You'll hardly expect me to help in finding you an appointment?"

"I have . . . certain resources." . . .

"Newbridge?" At the back of May-Kingston's brain there lingered a recollection that Lady Cartwright had said Norman could never marry until the place was sold ; nearer the surface of his mind there lurked the suspicion that the future of Newbridge and the past of the Britton entanglement were to be settled at one stroke. "You'd sell it?"

"If . . . necessary."

May-Kingston was moved to find Norman moistening his lips before he could answer. Margery, then, was worth a sacrifice which Miss Gloria Britton could not command ; yet did this mean that he loved her more or had learnt wisdom in six months ? Jingling the money in his pocket, May-Kingston reflected that, in the biggest decision he was required to make, he might as well spin a coin as try to understand young people in love.

"If I tell you that it would break her parents' hearts for Margery to marry you?" he asked.

"That must be for her to decide."

"You wouldn't try to influence her?"

"Certainly I should. I should . . . try to convince you all that I'm . . . not as . . . bad as you think."

May-Kingston turned away to hide an untimely smile :

"And if you failed? You'd still marry her on her twenty-first birthday without a penny or the prospect of a penny?"

"Of course! I'm in earnest about this, sir."

"I believe you are. . . . Well. . . . Run away now, because my wife's coming to see me. This little bomb-shell of yours is costing me about a hundred pounds a minute. We shall see you at lunch; and, if I were you, I wouldn't look quite so down-hearted. One never knows." . . .

It was not until the end of the meal that any one alluded to the reason for Norman's presence; but, when the coffee had been brought in, May-Kingston looked at the clock and ordered his car.

"I don't want you at the office this afternoon," he told Norman. "As you've made it clear to me that I can't prevent you from marrying Margery, I must give in with a good grace. When I was in the same position—a good many years ago now—I had the announcement in the papers next day."

Before Norman could speak, he found himself mysteriously alone. The front door slammed; and, a moment after, Margery came back to the dining-room.

From Cadogan Square to Westminster, the May-Kingstons sat in silence; and at the door of the office the silence was broken by a sigh:

"We'll hope it'll be all right, Florence. Three o'clock! The way these young people waste my time!"

Within his own room May-Kingston continued to waste time with speculation and doubt; and his misgivings were not allayed when he read in the papers next day, under "*Forthcoming Marriages*":

"Sir Norman Cartwright Bart. and Miss May-Kingston. The engagement is announced between Sir Norman Cartwright Bart. of Newbridge Park, Gloucestershire, only son of the late Sir Edgar and of Lady Cartwright, and Margery, only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew May-Kingston, of Beetham Manor, Suffolk, and 405 Cadogan Square."

At two inches' remove, and without sparing him by being printed in a different column or on a different day, came the announcement:

"Captain the Honourable and Mrs. Frederick Kendaile have left London for Melby Court, Gloucestershire."

3

During the ten days that separated them from the first shooting-party of the season, neither Norman nor the May-Kingstons had leisure to think much about the Kendailles. At a season when the newspapers were reduced to chronicling the composition of house-parties in Scotland and the house-parties in Scotland hunted through day-old papers in search of gossip, the news of their engagement invested two retiring young people with an importance that left them dismayed.

"Arrival of millenium!" Lady Cartwright telegraphed, following up her cryptic commentary with the first letter that her son had ever received from her. "*I must meet this child. Dot St. John tells me she's quite lovely and devoted to you. Every one tells me she's tremendously rich. And so you're going to bury her at Newbridge. You'll admit now that I was right about the Britton girl and quite right in telling you that you'd get over it. But fancy going to live within two miles of her. Talk of lions and lambs! It is a millenium.*". . .

Seemlier congratulations were sent from various parts of England by Norman's only relations, the Ashton-Cartwrights of Northamptonshire; and he received more invitations than he could hope to accept. The first days of the engagement were spent in a conscientious exchange of biography, though Margery learned more of Norman's family history and war record from a newscutting agency than he could ever be persuaded to tell her. And May-Kingston, though his decision was taken, watched unceasingly and told himself valiantly that he would break off the engagement even now if he had misjudged his man.

It was a singularly awkward time; and all were relieved when Norman set out in advance of his party to Newbridge. If he was naturally undemonstrative, his experience at Gloria's hands seemed to have frightened him out of displaying ordinary affection. The language of love might be used against him later; tenderness might be interpreted as weakness.

"Young men have changed since my day," decided May-Kingston, though he was touched by the manner of beautiful protectiveness which Norman, at twenty-six, offered to Margery at twenty. "I wonder if he puts '*Without prejudice*' when he writes to her. I wonder if he writes to her at all. I did.". . .

Margery confessed candidly that the letters and press-cuttings, still more Norman's tales of Newbridge, bewildered her. Marriage had seemed a simple business of changing your surname for

that of the man you liked best in the world ; but this was a matter of national importance.

" Sometimes . . . I think I'm dreaming," she confided on their last night together. " I imagined it was just you and me ; and we were going to be married . . . "

" So we are. It's the same thing even if the *Gloucester Times* calls it ' a most suitable alliance ', " Norman laughed. " I'm glad to have a pat on the back from the *Gloucester Times* man, even if I haven't the honour of his acquaintance. Jove ! They're going to keep us busy when we get down there, Margie ! "

With gratification which he made little attempt to conceal, Norman fingered the letters and telegrams from his own county. His agent, on behalf of the tenants, respectfully offered all good wishes and invited suggestions for a corporate present ; Lord Rainborough and Sir Hilary Thorpe welcomed him like a prince restored from his travels ; and those who had enjoyed the hospitality of Newbridge for two generations wrote—sometimes in the quavering penmanship of old age, sometimes with the aid of an equerry, sometimes in foreign languages from very august addresses—to pray happiness and prosperity on the house.

" I know I shall make the most terrible mistakes," Margery lamented. " If I'd ever guessed how dreadfully important you were . . . "

" But, darling, I'm not ! " Norman interrupted. " All these people are just neighbours and friends of the family. If you stick in one place for any time . . . "

" You won't give up loving me if I make mistakes ? "

" You won't make mistakes," he reassured her, with equal confidence in her aptness to learn and his own power to teach.

Before they left London, Margery was told all that she needed to know in preparation for meeting Lady Cartwright. As he led her from room to room on the first day, Norman recalled the afternoon when his imagination had posed her in each ; and his pride in her mounted as she made the atmosphere of the house her own. The frame was only waiting for her to step into it ; once there, he wanted the whole world to see her.

" Besides ourselves, I've only the guns staying in the house," he explained to May-Kingston. " But a certain number of people are coming to dine." He hesitated and then closed with the one fear that still haunted him whenever he looked north to the Melby woods. " Margery wouldn't let me tell her before—the name, I mean—, but I must now. If I'm going to know . . . the Kendailles, I must call at once ; if I don't call, it means I

don't want to know them, . . . which is impossible when Melby's land marches with mine. I propose to invite them to dinner at once ; and it'll be easier if I have you and Mrs. May-Kingston to back me."

"You can do that," May-Kingston agreed ; "or you can let things slide for a bit. So long as you're working in London, you can't be here much."

"But I propose to be here as much as possible." Norman's face hardened into the obstinate lines with which May-Kingston was becoming as familiar as with the inexorable : 'I propose . . .' Margery must find a means of holding her own against that mood. "I can't let them drive me from my own hearth and home ; the Kendailles are comparative new-comers, and if the county's not big enough for us both . . ."

Next morning Norman set out for Melby before the discussion could be reopened. He reached the garden without preparing any speech and was hoping to be told that no one was at home, when a turn in the path brought him face to face with Gloria. She was walking noiselessly along the grass and looking over her shoulder at the top-heavy antics of a Pekingese that scampered, gyrated, overturned and sprawled at her heels ; twenty yards behind, Freddie followed with a tennis-ball which he was tossing idly from hand to hand.

"Hullo !"

Gloria's startled cry shattered the peace of the drowsy, sun-checked woods ; her eyes narrowed and at once softened to a smile as she recovered composure. Norman knew that he was colouring and that the blood surged the more into his cheeks with every effort that he made to seem collected ; over Gloria's shoulder he saw Freddie look up unconcernedly and shorten the distance between them until he was by his wife's side, with his arm through hers in an attitude of possession and challenge. If the shock of meeting had been equal for all, they at least, by numbers and cooperation, had established an indefinable advantage ; but, knowing neither the mood nor the purpose of his coming, they lost some of their advantage by having to stand stiffly on guard while he aimed only at natural ease of address.

"I saw in the paper that you were back," Norman began. "I thought I'd take the opportunity, as I was at Newbridge for a few days, of coming at once to pay my respects."

Gloria bowed her acknowledgement and tucked her husband's hand under her own : if Norman had come to spy on them, he should have no occasion to think that they were anything but superlatively well-matched. To both men the meaning of the

action was transparent ; Freddie smiled to himself, and Norman felt the muscles of his face growing rigid.

" We got here on . . . Tuesday, wasn't it, darling ? "

As she referred the question to her husband, Gloria half-turned until her hair brushed his cheek ; and both smiled in the tiny conspiracy of love.

" I hope you had a good time abroad," said Norman smoothly, though he could remember when his own cheek had been brushed in the same way. " I'm only here for a few days ; I was wondering if you could dine on Monday."

" That's very kind of you. Didn't my father tell me you were working in London now ? " asked Freddie, to give himself time.

They too must often have wondered and discussed whether it would be a greater embarrassment to visit at Newbridge or abruptly to cease visiting ; but they had probably not expected to have the problem urged for their decision so quickly.

" Yes, I'm down here very little now," Norman answered. " Later on, of course . . . "

" We're not doing anything on Monday, are we ? " asked Gloria.

Freddie obediently took his cue :

" I don't think so. We should love to come. About half-past eight ? "

" Yes, if you will . . . Let me see, this is the first time I've seen you since you were married ; I hope it's not too late to offer you all good wishes ? "

From the lips of them both broke the conventionally eager :

" Oh, thank you very much."

Well-satisfied with himself, Norman held out his hand with intent to break away before he spoiled his effect. The antagonism had been so discreetly veiled that Freddie's smiles and Gloria's calculated caresses could not be interpreted by a disinterested spectator as provocative of a breach of the peace ; diplomatic relations were established between Newbridge and Melby, and it would be for the future to determine how far more intimate the two houses were to become ; best of all, Norman had offered his good wishes on the marriage before it had occurred to either of his adversaries to congratulate him on his engagement.

" I must get back to look after my guests," he murmured. " Till Monday, then."

" That will be delightful," said Gloria. " Oh, while I remember it—I haven't seen any papers for months—, wasn't some one saying . . . ? Freddie, it was your mother."

"Oh, she said there was an announcement of your engagement," Freddie supplemented. "Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Then please accept our congratulations and best of all good wishes," said Gloria warmly. "Is it any one we know?"

"It's Margery May-Kingston," answered Norman without giving himself time to be irritated by her deliberate use of the plural. "Her people were staying with me at the beginning of the summer, when you came to Newbridge, but I don't know whether you ever met her."

"I don't think so. . . . Will she be there on Monday?" asked Gloria. "Oh, that will be delightful. If we're going to be neighbours. . . ."

On reaching home Norman shut himself in the library on the plea of having many invitations to send out at short notice. The shock of meeting Gloria made his hand tremble till he could hardly write; and, though he had sworn never to think of her again, his thoughts went back to the useless questions with which he had tortured himself in the early summer. If she acted so easily now, had she been acting ever since she first pretended to care for him? If her love was what it seemed, had it now died? Was she treading it under foot?

"But that's all over," he reminded himself. "So long as she doesn't try to score off Margie. . . . There's no reason why she should. After all, she's got everything she wants." . . .

Leaving his letters, Norman went in search of Margery and led her to a corner of the garden where they would be uninterrupted.

"I'd better explain what I've been doing," he began abruptly. "I talked to your father first. . . . I walked over to Melby Court and asked the Kendailles to dine on Monday. Margie, I told you there was some one I'd been in love with: it was Gloria Kendaile, Gloria Britton. As neighbours, there'd be an intolerable amount of gossip if we had a breach; but I never want to see either of them again, and, if we endure an exchange of dinners once a year, that's the utmost we need do. . . . There! I'm glad it's over!"

"And so am I." Margery drew his head to her and kissed his cheek. "I hope it wasn't very horrid having to see her?"

Norman shrugged his shoulders without answering.

On the afternoon of his party, he busied himself by drawing up a plan of the table and writing cards to shew the men who were to be their partners at dinner.

In spite of the short notice he had been able to collect almost every one that he wanted Margery to meet at the first gathering in her honour. The neighbourhood was coming to greet the future mistress of Newbridge. Everything must go without a hitch; and there was no time to speculate, with his mother, whether the Kendailles realized the piquancy of this encounter, nor, with Mrs. St. John, whether Gloria's ambition would prevail over her jealousy when Freddie committed his first infidelity.

"We'll hope he *won't* be unfaithful," Norman interposed.

"He will be, unless Gloria works a bit harder. When they came to see me after the honeymoon . . ."

"They seemed extraordinarily happy the other day. . . . Sir Hilary Thorpe is taking you in. You're at the middle table, with your back to the window."

By concentrating his attention on small duties, Norman strove to keep himself from making mental comparisons with the scene enacted in the same place less than six months before. Now, as then, May-Kingston was creeping, with the deliberate soft tread of a cat, to secure himself a warm corner; the light of the fire shone with a rosy glow on his naked scalp; now, as then, his wife hovered in the background, tall and slender in black, with one hand fingering the diamond replica of her son's regimental badge; now, as then, all eyes turned to the head of the stairs and watched the rapid, pattering run of a girl who feared that she was late. Already they had all speculated how long to give the Kendailles.

The comparison made the waiting harder for Norman, though Gloria too must feel some embarrassment in coming, as Freddie's wife, into a house which she had so nearly made her own and in seeing Margery in the place which she had occupied for a moment. But perhaps she would feel only triumphant assurance that she could choose freely from among these tempting offers.

"Norman's an extraordinary oyster," confided Mrs. St. John, as she sauntered belatedly out of the chapel with Lady Cartwright and walked upstairs to get rid of her mantilla. "I've been talking to him, but he won't shew his hand. Now, I thought I understood something of the younger generation, but, if I'd been in his place, I don't think I should have had the nerve to fling Margery and Gloria together *quite* so soon."

"There won't be any scene," answered Lady Cartwright hoarsely, with the regret of one who would have arranged a dog-fight to break the oppressive tranquillity of the house. "You can't have scenes with my child: he's too dignified. Thank God, I'm not well-bred!"

"You can do all the harm you want without making scenes. . . . I don't *understand* Gloria. I told her right from the beginning that she'd behaved abominably; she doesn't care two straws for Freddie and treats him like dirt; and she still cares enough for Norman to ask me about him whenever we meet. . . ."

"She'd like to think she'd broken his heart," interrupted Lady Cartwright, who only listened to conversation about other people in order to earn the right subsequently of talking about herself. "I remember the terrible parting I had with her father, when I was firmly convinced that he'd blow his brains out. I've *never* been so excited. . . . Of course, I was very young at the time; and I remember how furious I was when the ruffian went off with his Spanish dancer a week after leaving me. . . . I've never really forgiven the admiral that."

"I wonder whether Gloria will ever forgive Norman for falling in love with some one else so soon."

"She's well out of it! Freddie may be a cad, but he's not such a bore as Norman."

"I wonder how long it will be before Freddie begins to beat her," mused Mrs. St. John, as she tossed her shawl inside her room. "If I were any *kind* of man, I don't think I could put up with Gloria's general air of '*I-never-wanted-to-marry-you*. It's-your-own-fault. . . .' Ah, here they are!" she added, looking down into the hall, as footsteps began to echo along the flagged corridor from the gate-house.

The announcement of dinner came like the news of relief to a beleaguered city; and, as Norman gave his arm to Gloria, they simultaneously abandoned the nervous volubility with which they had tried to carry off the meeting. A conventional compliment on Margery's appearance was followed by equally conventional questions about the time and place of the wedding. Gloria shewed no change from the days when they had first met in the Stratton Park hospital; and, if he could only forget their afternoon on the roof of the tower, he might have fancied that his infatuation for her had been a dream. Small of stature and round of bosom, white of skin and black of hair, she radiated the same ripe warmth as he had felt at their first meeting; that their moment of love together had left a scar on her soul or a mark on her memory she gave no sign.

Perhaps he had no business to look for scars when his own wounds had healed so quickly. Dot St. John was watching, his mother was watching ; all who knew or suspected anything were on the look-out for an unguarded note or gesture ; and he himself, within touching, whispering, intriguing distance of Gloria, was only bored by having to explain for the twentieth time that day that the wedding would take place in Newbridge chapel as soon as Margery had bought her *trousseau*. He was almost indifferent whether she saw that he was bored.

"You're so right !" he heard her exclaiming. "Coming from Melby, where everything is modern except my dear in-laws, who are ancient in everything but title, I couldn't help being impressed by the splendid medieval dignity of Newbridge : the house, which looks as though nothing could shake it, the moat, the causeway, those lines of ghostly armour, your wonderful, vaulted ceiling here . . ." As she threw a rapt glance upwards Norman looked once at the soft white line of her throat and then stared at his plate. "I remember, this summer, walking over here from Melby one night . . . before I was married . . . and thinking how gloriously deep-rooted and secure you and Newbridge were ; Melby seemed a stucco villa by comparison."

"But you're going to live there ?" Norman asked.

"For the present. You see, I'm going to have a little baby—oh, not for a long time yet—, and, as I've no mother of my own, my mother-in-law is very anxious to be with me when the time comes. She's such a darling that I don't like to disappoint her, and I don't know what would happen to the old man if we went away. You know he had a second stroke while we were on our honeymoon ? Yes, it was kept very quiet ; but the other sons were sent for, and Freddie thought he might have to come back. I really think he's being kept alive now with the hope of seeing my baby ; after taking a peerage when he had a foot and a half in the grave he's desperately anxious to see it secure ; he mumbles to me 'A boy, a boy, my dear ! Mind it's a boy,' as though it rested with me. . . . So we shall be settled at Melby for a good many months at any rate. You, of course, will come back here to live ?"

"We've really decided nothing," Norman answered.

Her prompt domesticity took him by surprise. In the mental picture which he had made on the day when she threw him over for the money of a man whom she mistrusted, he had imagined Gloria in her box at Covent Garden or in the enclosure at Ascot, proceeding splendidly from one great house to another or throw-

ing open a great house of her own to the people whom she had watched enviously through the long days of her poverty.

"I *hope* you'll be here. For purely selfish reasons," she added. "I shall find it far less dull."

A slight bow did duty for answer; and Norman speculated rapidly whether she was making deliberate overtures of friendship or unconsciously revealing that her neighbours were being tardy with their welcome: was he dreaming, or had old Rainborough whispered maliciously something about "taking the plunge" or "giving the rest of us a lead"?

As soon as she allowed him a moment's respite, Norman looked round the table to see how smoothly the others were progressing. Margery was submitting to advice on Italy as the destination for a honeymoon; and Freddie's caressing voice floated down the table in melodious recommendation of cities to be visited and hotels to be avoided. Every one seemed at ease; and it was not until the end of the evening, when the guests had departed, that his own sense of strain was confirmed. As he gave May-Kingston a final cigar in the smoking-room, there was a tap at the door and Margery came in.

"Am I disturbing you?" she asked. "Daddy, . . . may I speak to Norman alone?"

May-Kingston's eyes contrived to scrutinize her face in a rapid sweep to the clock.

"You ought to be in bed," he protested. "So ought we all, for that matter. Well, if you get into trouble with your mother, don't put the responsibility on me."

Only pausing to kiss her forehead, he stumped through the door and marked his going with resonant footsteps that grew gradually fainter. Margery came forward with her hands outstretched and a smile that struggled through misgiving and undefined fear.

"I . . . I only wanted to say good-night," she faltered.

"But what's worrying you, sweetheart?" Norman asked.

"I'm not worried, . . . but it was all rather horrible to-night!"

"It was."

"She's so lovely, with such wonderful charm. I don't wonder. . . . And she's so terribly in love with you still."

"Um . . . I don't see it, myself. But it can't affect *us*."

"Of course not. . . . But . . . I just felt I couldn't sleep, I could never be happy again if I didn't see you and hear again that you love me."

"I'll tell you that as often as you care to hear it." . .

"One millenium," confided Lady Cartwright to a maid who, sometimes fortunately for herself, understood no English, "may be regarded as a new emotion; two become a habit. . . . I shall never marry again for that reason," she added with abrupt transition. "Tiresome people!"

In spite of her impatient voice, she remained eagerly suspended half-way through the gate-house window; and, as soon as she was sure that the early-morning visitors were in truth the young Kendales, followed by a chauffeur staggering under the weight of a wooden box, she cut short the elaborations of her toilette and hurried into the hall.

"Forgive us for coming again so soon!" Gloria was saying to Norman, with the breathlessness that, overnight, had argued embarrassment. "You didn't tell me how long you would be here, and Freddie and I have been racking our brains to think what you'd like for a wedding-present. This house is such a museum that there's nothing you haven't got, and it's no use giving jewelry to Margery." The Christian name rose to her lips and passed them in sure challenge of friendship. "Well, we thought we'd bring you something 'on approval'; and, if you don't like it, you're to say so. It's a set of Georgian silver candle-sticks that we picked up in London; our heart's blood, Norman, we can hardly bear to part with them, but it was the only thing that seemed good enough."

Amid a murmured chorus of diffident thanks and protests, she turned to the box, which her husband was already beginning to unpack. Little cries of delight greeted the appearance of each piece; and, when Freddie, flushed from his exertion, but still—as ever—smiling, ranged the set on a table and fitted the candles in place, Margery hurried to Gloria's side and kissed her impulsively:

"They're *too* lovely! Of *course* we shall accept them, if you feel you really can spare them. Shan't we, Norman?"

"I feel it's rather hard, when you've had all the trouble of finding them . . ." he began.

A hardly perceptible stiffness of tone set Lady Cartwright smiling to herself and wondering whether her school-boy of a son would ever learn even a rudimentary adroitness of manner. This last attack had taken him by surprise, though Gloria had shewn at dinner that he was to have a millenium whether he liked it or not. The poor child was probably reminding himself that he

had given no present when Gloria's engagement was announced ; and he still knew so little of women, especially of young women who, after all, had to establish themselves in life, that he expected them to come, like the heroines of romantic novels, and to say : *'I have wronged you. Try to forgive me . . .'* Lady Cartwright edged to Mrs. St. John's side in the hope of discovering one intelligent human being who was capable of enjoying the piquancy of the scene. . . .

"I told you it was my heart's blood," Gloria was saying, with a laugh of creditable ease. "But you're a difficult person to give things to," she added with a glance of admiration round the library.

"Well, I can assure you I've nothing to compare with these," said Norman.

"I've never seen your silver. I suppose . . . No, you're busy."

"We were only discussing the arrangements for the wedding," said Norman. "If you'd like to . . . The strong-room's next door to the dining-room."

For all the decorous exterior, Lady Cartwright observed that their relationship became feverish, when they met, and every one seemed afraid of a moment's silence or repose. As Gloria jumped to her feet, the others hurried to follow Norman ; and, in dread of betraying embarrassment by not speaking, every one began to speak at once :

"I've never been privileged to see this." . . .

"London? Oh, I don't think so. . . . I'm *not* in love with the modern fashionable wedding ; 'circuses' I always call 'em.'" . . .

"I suppose the house is fire-proof ; otherwise I should never know a moment's peace with all his lovely things." . . .

"When you're my age, you'll have fixed on a standard wedding-present : a set of Jane Austen in limp leather ; two sets, if they're great friends ; three, if they're near relations." . . .

At the bottle-neck entrance to the strong-room Freddie dawdled behind and looked, past Margery, to the daggering sunlight on the ruffled water of the moat.

"You've seen this, I expect," he said. "So have I. Why shouldn't we relieve the congestion by wandering into the garden ? I suppose you'll spend most of your time here ? . . . *Hope* so. And, if Norman ever leaves you alone here, you must treat Melby as your own."

"Your wife's promised to help me in every kind of way," Margery answered enthusiastically. "She's been angelic already."

"She adores you."

"What nonsense! She never saw me till last night."

"I never saw you till last night."

Without allowing himself to be hurried or checked, Freddie gave full value to his line before turning, as though the line had no value, to watch the others as they stepped bending over the stone window-ledge into the courtyard. Though nothing could have been overheard, there was enough in his attitude and expression to bring Gloria swiftly to his side.

"We must fly," she announced. "Your father wants the car to take him into Gloucester."

"I've been telling Miss May-Kingston how delightful it will be to have her as a neighbour," Freddie explained.

"I'm sure you have," Gloria retorted with what seemed to Lady Cartwright less than her usual suavity; "but we *must* be going home. You've decided on the twenty-third, your mother tells me," she went on, with a smile to Margery. "We shall come, whatever happens. And you *will* accept the candlesticks? And we *are* going to be the greatest friends, aren't we?"

Her recovery was complete before she had taken her last farewell; and the others returned to their interrupted discussion with a pleased sense that her coming had been an omen and a blessing. The south of Spain was chosen for the honeymoon, the bridesmaids were canvassed and invited; with the arrival of his solicitor, Norman's share in the preparations was concluded, and he set out with Margery and her mother on a round of ceremonial visits.

Five weeks later, the wedding took place in Newbridge chapel. Lady Cartwright and the May-Kingstons, the guard of honour from Norman's old regiment, the best man and the bridesmaids travelled down from London; but the rest of the congregation was gathered from the neighbourhood. Neither in numbers nor in magnificence could the ceremony or the reception compare with the Kendalle splendours of six months before; but at least on Gloria it dawned clearly that no comparison had been attempted. Wedged in a narrow pew with her husband and his parents, she realized that this wedding stood to hers in the relation of Norman's title to Lord Melby's, of Newbridge Park to Melby Court. The Rainboroughs, who were being thrust forward, had not yet called on the young bride; old Sir Hilary Thorpe had journeyed half the way from Paddington without recognizing her; but they all flocked to see a boy, whose name happened to be Cartwright, marrying a girl whose grandfather had swung his own pick.

"One pull of being married in London is that we did escape

all this," whispered Freddie, craning his neck at the steady rustle and creak behind him.

"I don't know why you want to escape it," Gloria whispered in return. "There are many more dull people in London; and they *all* came!"

"Would you like me to become 'county'? Cut this place out? You've only to say the word."

Gloria flushed with annoyance at the memory of a recent controversy in which she had been worsted. Throughout their engagement, as the observant Dot St. John was quick to note, she had tried to subjugate Freddie by a parade of indifference; when he offered her new bribes, she did not fail to point out that the wealth of the Kendailles was their single recommendation. Automatically, after that, there developed a damaging comparison between Newbridge and Melby until Freddie was moved to analyse the Cartwright pretensions. With a handful of coloured counters he demonstrated that, though Norman might affect to be the heir of four hundred years' selected breeding, he was in fact the offspring of two parents (marked with white counters), four grandparents (marked with red counters) and eight great-grand-parents. In four hundred years the "pure" Cartwright blood must have been fed from the veins of some four thousand ancestors, whose number no doubt included saints and cut-throats, libertines and ascetics, philosophers and imbeciles. The less said about heredity the better. What a man did counted higher than what a man was born; if you were rich enough, you could buy pedigree stock in the human market as well as in another.

"It might not be as easy as you think," retorted Gloria.

"Is it worth it?"

She was spared the embarrassment of answering by the sudden hush that heralded the approach of the bride.

"You won't have a chance," she found time to whisper, as the organ pealed out. "They're going abroad; and then they'll be living in London."

Throughout a service and a reception which filled her with such indefinable exasperation that she was glad of an excuse to take her father-in-law home, Gloria found a meagre consolation in repeating to herself:

"They're going abroad; and then they'll be living in London." . . .

CHAPTER THREE

ORDEAL BY MARRIAGE

' If rightly taken, marriage is the best of all human societies. We cannot live without it, and yet we do nothing but decry it. It happens, as with cages, the birds without despair to get in, and those within despair of getting out. Socrates being ask'd whether it was more commodious to take a wife, or no ? " Let a man take which course he will," said he, " he will be sure to repent." '

—MONTAIGNE : *Essays*.

I

A WEEK after the wedding, Newbridge was surrendered to an occupying army of builders. Two days later, the Cartwrights left London for Granada.

As the train steamed out of Victoria, May-Kingston called out for at least the third time that Norman was not to hurry back ; and his prayer, then and subsequently, was that his advice might be followed literally. For all their trust and devotion, Margery and Norman were a pair of babies ; the worst of letting a girl marry at nineteen or so was that, by thirty, she was a different person ; and, though Margery's husband would never have cause for anxiety, Margery's father might well fear that Norman would abuse her docility to force her into the Newbridge frame. All that, however, had been argued away before the engagement was sanctioned ; in marriage, young people had to work out their own salvation ; and the only duty of a bystander in these modern days, when every one lived in public, was to see that they were given fair play.

Looking back on the period between the two weddings, May-Kingston reached an uncomfortable conviction that fair play was being denied equally to all parties.

" You can live in public without being undressed in public," he muttered.

Chatterboxes like Lady Cartwright and Mrs. St. John did

not help the Kendaille marriage through its first difficulties by stripping it to shew its angularities. Had Lord Rainborough not averted his gaze so disdainfully, Freddie might have left unspoken some of his sneers at these unforgiving neighbours ; and, if Gloria were given a fair chance, she would be less disposed to measure her strength against Margery. Already she had all the money that she could want ; at Lord Melby's death she could have all the precedence she desired ; and, when her baby was born, she would have plenty to occupy her thoughts.

"At the same time . . ." May-Kingston murmured to the plate-glass window of a house-agent's office. So long as Norman and Margery were pursuing the departing summer through Spain, they would be spared unreal cordiality and furtive rivalry ; but a furnished flat in Berkeley Square would protect them against invitations to Melby while the alterations were being carried out at Newbridge. "And then, if these infernal women will keep their mouths shut . . ."

Like most men who decry gossip about their own kindred, May-Kingston was not unwilling to encourage the chatterboxes when they contributed information of interest about other people. From Mrs. St. John he learned, in the following weeks, that the Kendailles were settling down to an armed neutrality at home, but that their united efforts had won them but a chill reception in the county ; Freddie, it was stated, had discovered political ambitions, which were to be used by Gloria in forcing Lord Rainborough's side-door ; and it was a matter of amused speculation whether Lady Cartwright or the admiral would be the first to benefit financially by the two marriages.

"I'm inclined to back Mary," decided Mrs. St. John. "She can usually get round Norman by threatening to make a scene. Gloria has refused to have her father in the house, for fear of injuring her social prospects."

"All the money Norman can spare will go on Newbridge," May-Kingston predicted.

"Is it finished yet ? The house, I mean ; I suppose the money's inexhaustible."

"Far from it. And you can tell Lady Cartwright I said so. Tell her, further, not to badger Norman. When young people marry, they should be given time to find their feet. . . . The house ? I don't know ; I haven't asked."

"I hear Margery and Gloria are thick as thieves," Mrs. St. John continued unabashed.

"I'm glad to think there's no reason under the sun why they shouldn't be."

Though he affected to speak with satisfaction, May-Kingston could have wished that the intimacy had ripened more slowly. As Newbridge was not yet ready for entertaining, he accepted an invitation from the Rainboroughs to spend Christmas at Tapley Court with Norman and Margery. A heavy programme had been arranged for the bride; and it was impossible for her to conceal, in almost daily meetings with Gloria, that she was being accorded a more open-hearted welcome than had been extended to the Kendailes. So far as May-Kingston could judge, the neighbourhood was evenly divided between those who did not know that Freddie was in residence and those who did not care.

"You'll make things easier for my child," May-Kingston told his host bluntly, "if you don't differentiate too strongly between her and Mrs. Kendaile."

"Margery—if I may be allowed the liberty of calling her that—is irresistible," Lord Rainborough answered with equal candour. "I don't know Mrs. Kendaile."

"Aren't you punishing her for her husband's sins?"

"Freddie Kendaile wants kicking," was the rejoinder. "And I'm not enchanted by what I've heard of the Britton connection in London. I suppose we're old-fashioned down here, but I'm not very anxious for my daughters to learn about life from Mrs. Kendaile. However . . . If you think it's going to make trouble between the two houses, I'll get my wife to call."

Having gained his point in principle, May-Kingston was reluctant to insist on details; but he repented his intervention when he found that the Kendailes were being invited for the night of the biggest party. A possible clash was averted chiefly by the pathos of Margery's shyness. For all Norman's coaching, the unfamiliar names bewildered her ears as the unfamiliar faces perplexed her eyes; and she would have run away in panic if she had not feared to disappoint her husband and disgrace them both. Flushed and frightened, she smiled her acknowledgement of the elaborate congratulations; but, by the time that they took their places for dinner, she remembered only the whispered encouragement of Lady Thorpe:

"Dear child, you're doing it wonderfully! Forty years ago . . . But it wasn't nearly as big, and I hadn't a quarter of your looks."

Then she felt suddenly at peace: the eyes, the voices and the attention that had been trained upon her were suddenly withdrawn; the initial murmur of a dozen different conversations rose in a protective hum, and she sank into an exhausted silence which her neighbours considerably left unbroken.

When she could look up without attracting attention, she glanced in her husband's direction and discovered him leaning slightly back, engaged in a triangular conversation; he at least was at ease, and, to crown her love, Margery felt a glowing pride in having married him.

"In time. . .," she murmured.

"I beg your pardon?" said Lord Rainborough.

"How silly of me! I was thinking aloud!" she answered with a deep blush.

"May I not hear?"

"It's all so strange. . . . Oh, Norman told me I *wasn't* to say things were strange! But they *are*. . . . I was thinking that in time I should grow used to it . . . grow used to the happiness. . . . It's like the first day of the holidays, and I can't realize that Norman and I have all our lives before us, that we're only just beginning." . . .

Lord Rainborough overtook an unguarded sigh and converted it into a laugh:

"You're a most infectious young person, Lady Cartwright."

Shyness again averted a crisis at the end of dinner when she made her usual mistake of standing back instead of exercising her bride's privilege of passing first through the door; but the mistake was more than retrieved when she fled to Gloria's side and insisted on their going out together. For a reason which she never understood, three strange women, with smiling, soft eyes, kissed her and addressed her by her Christian name. In the drawing-room, however, she disgraced herself again by murmuring to Norman:

"Darling, I thought you were *never* coming!"

The murmur was overheard and repeated. Every one laughed; but, as her eyes filled with tears, she was astonished to hear old Sir Hilary assuring her that she might live to be a thousand without enjoying a greater success.

In the New Year the Cartwrights returned to London and at the end of January they read that Gloria had given birth to a daughter.

"I'm afraid her *papa* and her *grandpapa* resented her not being a boy," she wrote in acknowledging Margery's congratulations; "though I can't see what difference it makes. *She's flesh*

of my flesh and bone of my bone, I love her more than I thought I could love anything in the world ; and I'm counting the days until you come here in the summer and I can introduce you." . . .

When she had finished reading the letter, Margery passed it without comment to her husband and watched his face as his eyes flickered rapidly over the page. If Gloria's handwriting was no longer a shock to him, his fortitude might still be tested when he found her rhapsodizing over a baby that might have been his.

"We must think about a christening-present," was Norman's only comment. "I didn't realize it was due yet. . . . They seem to be . . . spreading themselves," he added, as he turned to the back page. "God-parents and proxies : a field-marshal and a cabinet minister and a royal highness."

"Don't you think that perhaps she's a little bit disappointed too and is trying to cover it up by thinking of other things ? " Margery hazarded gently. "She *did* so want it to be a boy ! She told me so, again and again. I think it's horrid of the others to let her see they mind, after all she's gone through ; they ought to make her think they *wanted* a girl. . . . Do *you* want a son so much as all that, Norman ? " she added inconsequently.

"I suppose every man wants his first child to be a boy," Norman answered reflectively. "Girls marry and change their names and get absorbed in their husbands' life ; it's the boys who carry on the family."

"It's the girls who become the mothers and bear the children," sighed Margery. "I should have *imagined*, when you thought of all a woman suffers . . . the pain and the terrible *fear* . . . you'd be grateful . . . to have a child at all." . . .

As she broke off with a shudder, Norman walked behind her chair and linked his hands round her neck until she had to look up to receive his kiss :

"Darling, you're too tender-hearted ! You mustn't let Gloria's letter upset you."

"It wasn't that ! I was a little bit miserable before I read it ; I'm afraid already. Norman, they tell me I'm going to have a baby, too, and you must be ever so sweet to me. I *hope* it'll be a boy . . . for your sake ; but, even if it isn't, you'll go on loving me, won't you ? Promise ! "

Thereafter, as he dropped on one knee beside her chair and bent over her hands, one thought drove all others from Norman's mind : he had to make ready for the advent of a young Cartwright, who must be born at Newbridge so that his opening

eyes might behold the inheritance over which he would one day rule. The alterations were hurried on apace; the May-Kingstons and even his own mother were pressed for advice; and, at the end of April, Margery was removed from the alleged noise and excitement of London to the peace of Gloucestershire, there to be watched and comforted for two months by her mother, with anxious and disturbing weekly visitations from her husband.

His romantic care for tradition in establishing the mistress of Newbridge in the setting appropriate to the birth of his heir extricated Margery from an atmosphere of solicitude that was beginning to make her fretful even before she left London. Alone with her mother in the venerable protection of the scarred old house, walking in the woods or sauntering along the flagged sentry-path by the side of the moat, she achieved tranquillity of spirit for the first time since her engagement.

It was a period of wonderful day-dreaming and reflection.

"What am I doing with myself?" she wrote to Norman. "Thinking, my dear one, thinking. Trying to understand life, which is a big thing if you've never given much attention to it before. I seem (let me be slangy just for once, darling!) to have gone in at the deep end, all in a moment; and I'm trying to puzzle out the meaning of marriage and children and all that sort of thing."

As soon as it was reported that the house was open, Margery was besieged by callers, who motored from the outskirts of the neighbourhood to lend her books or to sit with her for half an hour in the garden; and, though she missed Norman more than she ever dared tell him, there was always companionship and a cordial welcome at Melby.

"The more you come here, the better I shall be pleased," Gloria told her. "And if I can provide an escape . . . Freddie says that all the bores of Gloucestershire are encamped twenty-deep at Newbridge and that you're too angelically patient to send them away. I'm afraid I wasn't nearly so long-suffering."

"I think it's so kind of them to bother," answered Margery, who had gathered from stray hints in conversation that many of her friends had still to make Gloria's acquaintance. "Most of them I've never even seen before, so I'm nothing to them personally."

"But they've known Norman ever since he was an infant in arms, he's one of the traditions of the place. Funny . . ." Gloria looked away at the slumbering child by her side. "Don't you think it's all a *little* bit unreal at this time of day? The

great change during the last few years . . . socially, I mean, . . . is that people are more important than their frames. Of course, in the backwoods here . . . Take Freddie and me! He's he, and I'm I; we marry; people like us, or they don't. Then my father-in-law, with one foot in the grave decides that he wants a peerage. I don't mind; he richly deserves it. But, when he dies—and he may, any time now—, all the title and the pomp go to Freddie who's never done anything to earn it and just *happens* to be the eldest son. Everything changes from the moment when he calls himself Lord Melby. My dear, it's begun already! The moment the old man took a title, we became terribly grand. It's the same with you: you're both darlings, but, if Norman's name were Smith and if he *didn't* own Newbridge, there'd be none of this fuss."

Margery listened in some confusion to Gloria's vehement mixture of insincerity and candour. Her "puzzling", in the long summer days, had not stopped short of her young neighbour; but she was no nearer an understanding of these abrupt decisions and contradictions. According to Mrs. St. John's unsought confidence, Gloria had married for money and position: the opportunities of the first she ignored by living a vegetable life in the country with her husband and child; at the second she now mocked, after forcing her moribund father-in-law to acquire it for her.

"What *are* the things that matter?" Margery questioned.

Her abysmal inexperience made her forget sometimes that Gloria was less than three years older. When she remembered, it seemed as though these months of inactivity had been given them, in the headlong rush of youth, to take stock of elemental things. Life was wonderfully sweet, but it was very strange. She was beginning to think, to be serious; sometimes, even, to wonder whether her old bubbling moods irritated Norman. . . .

What was that? Ah, the strangeness of life . . . At the beginning of the war, conduct had been simple and clear-cut; but no one now seemed to have any standards. It was amazing that she and Gloria should be friends, that Norman and Freddie should join them in a conspiracy to sink the past; but everything about Gloria was so amazing that Margery wondered whether she herself had a philosophy. Sometimes, as her black eyes smiled dreamily at her sleeping child, she seemed to be planning a vast campaign; always she seemed to be possessed of an immense secret. And in a year she had become no less inscrutable than her husband.

"The things that matter?" she echoed. "You'll soon

know. Being married is real ; a husband who shares the whole of your life . . . But being a mother is much more real than being a wife. And getting what's due to you. I don't care tuppence for frills, but I've a tremendously high opinion of myself, . . . as you may have noticed. But for that, I should have been squeezed to the wall. I believe in my own looks, my own brains, my own personality ; and, if you told me I had none, it would make no difference. I believe in them ; and I'm going to have justice done to them. . . . If it wasn't for his old father, I should make Freddie live in London ; but until the old man decides whether he's going to die or not . . ."

"Is he ill again ?" Margery interrupted.

"They've summoned the other sons. Freddie's been with him night and day for nearly a week."

"But, my dear, why didn't you tell me ?" cried Margery, as she stood up quickly. "I'm dreadfully sorry ! I wouldn't have come here, if I'd known you were in such trouble."

"I've loved seeing you. And, after all, one has to be philosophic : he's very old and very feeble, the end *must* come quite soon. I can't make Freddie see that : though they've not a taste in common, he and the old man idolize each other. Sometimes I've wondered whether I oughtn't to be jealous about it ; I could never bear to have a rival anywhere."

Gloria stopped speaking as the door opened and a servant came in with a message.

"I'm going now," said Margery. "I *do* hope . . ."

Gloria sat staring across the Severn valley, as though unconscious that any one was with her. Then she roused and looked from her child to Margery and from Margery to the house behind them :

"He's dead. . . . And Freddie wants me. Tell Mr. Kendaille I'm coming at once and then send nurse here for baby," she continued to the servant.

As the door closed, Gloria's lips moved silently as though she were regretting her wasted first opportunity of saying : 'Tell his lordship . . .'

Though Lord Melby had lived in retirement for a quarter of a century, his death recalled to an older generation of businessmen the ruthless and irresistible drive which the Wessex and Mercia had conducted, forty years before, through a country of warring and waning private banks. From London, Birmingham

and Bristol, his old associates and rivals collected for his funeral ; the last local enmities were laid to rest ; and the eyes of the neighbourhood turned wonderingly on Freddie and Gloria, as though the death of the broken old autocrat impelled them to a different and more active life.

" There's one thing about dying," Lady Cartwright confessed to May-Kingston, with more assurance than orthodoxy, as they travelled back to London together. " You do know where you are. I suppose Freddie feels he can come and racket in London now with a good conscience, though Dot St. John tells me that, since the child was born, Gloria has become reconciled to the country."

" It looks as if they intended to set up a local ' racket ', as you call it," answered May-Kingston, with memories of obituary notices that advertised the living no less generously than they praised the dead.

The new Lord Melby, in compliment to his father, was being unanimously invited to join the board of the Wessex and Mercia Bank. In retiring from the position of conservative candidate, he assured his supporters that he would represent their interests, to the utmost of his ability, " in another place "; and the Gloucestershire papers were already recording his appointment to the councils and committees of the neighbourhood.

" This is Gloria's opportunity."

" It's an opportunity for them both," May-Kingston answered guardedly, as he looked from a subscription-list headed by Lord Melby to the appointment of Lady Melby as patroness of the local cottage-hospital. " So far they've not done much to justify their existence. As they're young and energetic . . ."

" They'll put my poor Norman's nose out of joint if they're too energetic," Lady Cartwright murmured with secret enjoyment.

" So long as Norman's working in London and Margery's in her present state," May-Kingston predicted confidently, " they'll be thankful to have any additional burdens taken off their hands."

Then he found it politic to bury himself again in his papers. Though Norman was too uncommunicative to complain, he was privately hurt that the constituency, after one tentative offer, had been made over to Freddie and was only rendered again when Freddie had no further use for it. The wound to his pride was betrayed in a stiff attitude of resentment against Lord Rainborough. Any one less sensitive of his dignity might have reflected that no election was in sight ; Norman must know that,

when he was first approached, he had neither means nor leisure to stand. If Margery was to be believed, however, a grievance had been established; and a chance of ventilating it was provided when Lady Rainborough enquired whether the cottage-hospital *fête* could be held, as usual, at Newbridge. Though Norman demonstrated convincingly that his wife was not strong enough to support the fatigue, his refusal savoured of revenge; and the Rainboroughs were only saved from opening Tapley Court to an entertainment which they detested by Gloria's timely offer of Melby.

The move, whatever its intention, established checkmate. When the Melbys curtailed their mourning in the public interest, no one dared to recall that for thirty years the *fête* had been held at any house but theirs; the antagonism of Tapley Court yielded to an awkward sense of obligation; and Norman himself was barred from disparaging an effort which he had refused to undertake.

Non-resistance turned to support when Margery was required to promise beds for any one who could not be accommodated at Melby; and, though Norman wrote from London to doubt the necessity for such preparations, he was to learn, in subsequent letters, that Freddie was forcing the Tapley and District Cottage Hospital upon Gloucestershire no less invincibly than his father had forced his bank upon the midland and western counties. H.H. Princess Georgiana was to open the bazaar; the Russian ballet, headed by Lisa Ouranova, was coming from the Alcazar; George Arnold was bringing his company, with two scenes from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while the bidders for the burlesque auction and the audience for the open-air theatre were being recruited from Freddie's business associates.

"My part is indicated unmistakably," Norman muttered, as he rescued Margery from an elderly circle of strangers. Their rare and reverent utterances hinted that they belonged to the days of John Kendaille's most annihilating victories; their speech betrayed the midlands. "Off with you to your room, my child. It's too bad of the Melbys to shoot their rubbish on us."

Though he concealed his impatience throughout an evening of interminable small-talk, Norman matured more than one ironical phrase of congratulation for Freddie on his sombre friends. Next day at Melby, however, he found the atmosphere unpropitious for grumbling. Before he caught sight of her, he could feel that Gloria was making a success of the *fête*; when they met, he saw that her good looks and good humour were gaining her new

friends, even as her self-possession and alertness had converted old enemies.

"I'll be honest," Lady Thorpe confided, as she surveyed the crowded luncheon-tables through a gold-rimmed eye-glass. "I didn't do her justice. When one remembers the general run of Freddie's friends. . . . Who *are* all these people, do you suppose?"

"Friends from London, I expect," Norman answered.

"Ah! . . . I didn't go to the wedding, but I heard all the world was there. I had no idea she was so *répandue*. Well, we want some young people down here, and this is a splendid house for entertaining."

"If they continue to live here."

"There are all the signs of it: new cottages and what not. Freddie's taking the shooting in hand; and Hilary told me he'd subscribed most liberally to the hunt. I take it that's all her doing? Now the war's over, we need you young men to give us a lead. I was sorry to hear, when I called to see your wife the other day, that you were absolutely tied to London."

"For the present," Norman answered. "You see, my father-in-law has no one now to succeed him in the business."

"It's a pity you can't stand against this radical, now that Freddie's gone to the Lords. Charlie Rainborough told me he was at his wits' end for a candidate."

"I'm afraid I've no time for politics," said Norman. "Now that women are eligible, why don't you approach Lady Melby?"

The suggestion, of which the irony went disastrously unnoticed, at least changed the tenour of a conversation that was beginning to irritate Norman. It was characteristic of unthinking women like Lady Thorpe that they should refuse at one moment to know the Kendailles and, at the next, lose their heads about them. Gloria was surely not the only woman who had ever conducted a successful garden-party, though, for her own ends, she had chosen to make a miracle of this. The drive was black and impassable with cars and carriages; the tables in the long marquees were already half-stripped of their wares; and the price of admission to the theatre had twice been raised.

Pinning his steward's rosette in place, Norman observed Freddie, in high good-humour with himself, conducting the Russian ballet to the dressing-room. On his return, he could not resist asking him whence he had collected the strange friends whom he had billeted on Newbridge.

"For the moment I can't remember who was sent to you," said Freddie with a thoughtful frown. "They were respectable

enough, weren't they? I hope there's been no scandal; they've not refused to attend prayers or anything of that kind?"

"Oh no! But I found them more . . . taciturn than most of your friends," said Norman, realizing, when it was too late, that he had provided his neighbour with a gratuitous opportunity of indulging his malice.

"That was their respectability," Freddie explained, as he turned on his heel. "Forgive my running away; I'm supposed to be making a speech if I can find any one to listen to me."

Left to himself, Norman wandered through the dim, airless tents, to the accompaniment of a shrill, competitive clamour from the long line of stalls. (The Rainborough girls had been pressed into selling!) Outside, he could hear Freddie's speech ending in a burst of applause; the deliberate beat of a drum advertised the attractions of an auction conducted by a famous London comedian; from the tea-tent came a preparatory clatter of crockery and a tinkle of spoons, soon to be drowned in the strident gaiety of a military band; and, like white dragonflies, the village school-children darted hither and thither with hand-bills of the ballet and masque.

Passing out of the last tent, Norman drifted behind the temporary stage in search of a dump for his purchases. The ballet, so far as he could see between a line of screens, was going as triumphantly as everything else. Seats and gangways were packed; the audience was loudly appreciative; and on every detail lay the stamp of minute personal direction.

"Afraid I'm too self-conscious for this sort of thing," Norman reflected, as, at the end of each scene, Freddie hurried into the middle of the stage and threw a cloak round the chief dancer's shoulders. "And I'm certainly in the wrong place," he added in embarrassment at finding himself staring at a row of dancers who were unconcernedly resting and powdering their faces in full view of the park.

He was moving away towards the main body of the audience when Lisa Ouranova herself ran on tip-toe behind the last screen and sank on to one of the chairs. She was followed a moment later by Freddie, bearing in his arms a long fur-cloak which he wrapped round her. As it fell on her shoulders, she stretched up her hands and drew his head down till she could kiss him.

"Lisa, you *must* remember where you are!" Norman heard in an anguished whisper.

"Is my Freddie afraid?"

"No, but . . . the princess has asked to have you presented to her. At once."

"And if I say 'no'?"

"You *can't*! You asked me to arrange it!"

"Well . . . you kiss me! As in old times."

"Not now!"

"You promised it would make no difference!"

"Later . . ."

As Norman walked away, no longer caring whether he had been observed, an urgent mutter of entreaty was being received and punctuated by teasing laughs.

4

"Be an angel and find Freddie for me!" As the audience trooped obediently to a loudly-proclaimed tombola at the other end of the lawn, Norman roused from stupefaction to find Gloria touching his arm. "I want him to take charge of the princess while I see that my child's all right. You've never met her, have you? Well, come back; and I'll introduce you."

Though he tried to carry out the order, Norman could not move until he was sure that this place, these people, their bustling movements and distant speech were real. The princess was sitting beside the upright black figure of old Lady Melby; Sir Hilary Thorpe joined them, bowing low over her hand. Percy Kendale hurried up with a message, bowed and disappeared. Did he or his mother, did Gloria, did any one know that Freddie, within a year of his marriage, was intriguing with another woman, as every one—including Gloria—might have foretold?

"It's . . . dirty," the stern puritan tradition of the Cartwrights whispered.

Starting at the urgency of Gloria's hand, Norman returned to the stage in time to meet the dancer coming away in loose, high boots and a long fur cloak, with Freddie at her heels carrying shawls and a pair of ballet slippers. For a moment, whether they had seen him or not, he expected to find them confused; then he realized that they had rehearsed their parts before Freddie's former mistress accepted an invitation to stay with him in the same house as his wife; finally he wondered whether this was a reply to Gloria's alternating insolence and indifference.

"I'll go at once," Freddie promised in answer to his message. "Would you mind carrying these things up to the house? You've met Sir Norman Cartwright, haven't you, Lisa?"

"I know you very well on the other side of the footlights. Aren't you just off to America?" Norman asked.

"On Friday week. The others go back to London this night."

The declaration seemed to invite a question :

"And you're staying on?"

"Freddie is an old friend," she explained. "I have been here three, four times. His wife I had not met before. I did not think . . . Freddie with a wife and child! It seems too amusing to be true."

When he had taken her to her room, Norman returned to the lawn and accompanied Gloria to a revolving open summer-house in which a nurse was sitting beside a perambulator. Though he did not dream of putting his sympathy into words, he was disconcerted at realizing that for the first time in twelve months he and Gloria were alone together. If she shared his uneasiness, she concealed it as skilfully as on the morning when he came over to congratulate her on her marriage. The part allotted him, apparently, was that of an old family friend who must naturally be interested in seeing her first child. . . .

"There! Don't you call her *rather* sweet?" Gloria bent adoringly over the perambulator. "Judith. . . . We had *terrible* difficulty over choosing the name! Judith Kendaille is all right, but if she married a man called Smith! Imagine Judith Smith! . . . Darling, you'll never marry any one called Smith, will you? They're not really nice people. . . . She's been quite comfortable, nurse?"

"Oh yes, my lady."

"Our first tooth," Gloria explained before turning to look at the crowded lawn and the distant line of tents.

The secret gratification of seeing her child had brought a smile into her black eyes; and her cheeks flushed softly at the unchallenged success of her party, as though it were an augury of the triumph that was to accompany her through life. The smile could not conceivably mask any suggestion that her husband was scheming to be unfaithful; and yet twelve months ago it was no less inconceivable that Norman should be standing by her side again, admiring her child and accepting her tacit convention that they should both forget ever having been in love.

"You're to be most warmly congratulated on to-day's show," he volunteered.

"I think it's going off quite well. In fact, I know it is. Otherwise, I wouldn't have undertaken it," she answered with a note of metallic assurance that was new to Norman.

"You'll find everybody saying the same."

"It's not worth doing a thing unless you do it well. That's

my character. And when once you've made up your mind . . . If anything happened to Freddie, I should probably marry the Prince of Wales ; he might not like it, but I should insist. Si mon mari avait l'idée de s'en aller avec cette Lise, bien alors . . ."

Involuntarily Norman started, but she only laughed and moved farther from the hearing of the nurse.

"I don't quite know *what* one does on those occasions," he murmured :

"I should get him back, of course ; that's *success* . . . You degrade yourself if you try *too* hard to retain him ; but when you *force* him to come back . . . You're successful by conquering, not by wheedling."

The exposition of Lady Melby's philosophy left Norman trying helplessly to reconcile her with the soft and pliant Gloria Britton who, without a personality of her own, had existed to please others. Every girl, before marriage, must have likes and dislikes, aspirations and experiences, a whole life of her own, no less than a man ; because she took his name and shared his house, he stood in danger of expecting her to be the shadow of his spirit and the echo of his mind. Even Margery he only knew as some one who fitted herself into his life and directed his house and was to bear his children. But something more was required to explain this change in Gloria : her lust for power dated from the time when she married a husband against whom she was powerless ; she seemed to have made success her ambition on the day when she despaired of finding love.

"Ought we to be going back ?" he asked abruptly. "The *Midsummer Night's Dream* will be beginning in a minute."

As soon as he had escaped, Norman asked himself how much he was to tell Margery ; on his return to Newbridge, he found that he could tell her nothing. She was too young to understand what turpitude men and women could commit for passion ; and, by banishing the sordid from conversation, he hoped, insecurely, to banish it from life. To disparage another man, moreover, was not palatable ; and, if once he began to diagnose Gloria, he might end by endorsing Margery's criticism of her after their first meeting : "*She's so terribly in love with you still.*" . . .

"There *may* be nothing in it," he argued with himself. "The Russian girl was making the running all the time. And, if Freddie wants to get rid of her, he can." . . .

Within a week of his return to London, Norman learned that the storm had burst and that Gloria was putting her philosophy of success to its first practical test.

"You'd better burn this letter, because I'm going to be indiscreet," Margery wrote. "There's been a terrible flare-up at Melby; and that Lisa Ouranova is at the bottom of it. Freddie asked her to stay on till her boat sailed; and Gloria was very angry at his inviting people without consulting her. She told him that he must cancel the invitation: if this girl didn't leave the house within an hour, she would. Freddie forbade the girl to stir; so Gloria drove into Gloucester with the nurse and child and went up to London. Old Lady Melby has come back, post haste, to keep up appearances; but no one knows when Gloria's going to relent. Freddie, I hear, has set his teeth and pretty well made a prisoner of the girl. Meanwhile, Gloria is telling everybody; I suppose, with an idea of getting sympathy. Or she may have lost her head: she has a temper where her pride's concerned. I heard first from Lady Rainborough, who said how funny it was for Freddie to invite a woman to his house when there had already been rather a scandal about her (he's supposed to have given her a house in London before the war). I said there couldn't have been anything in the scandal, or he wouldn't have asked Gloria to meet her. Then Gloria came to see me, and I'm afraid there's no doubt at all. One can't blame her for being furious; but she's doing herself a terrible lot of harm. All the people who were so horrid when she first came to live here are saying "What can you expect?"; and I'm told the story has reached the princess, who of course is very angry indeed at being asked to meet such a woman. Lord Rainborough wouldn't be surprised if Gloria's presentation were cancelled. If I could do anything, I would; but I'm really not equal to the effort at present. I thought I'd give you this warning in case you run across Gloria". . .

Norman was pondering his reply when Gloria and her troubles were driven from his mind by a telegram from Mrs. May-Kington:

"Son born this morning both doing well much love and warmest congratulations."

5

For two months neither Margery nor he had time or inclination to wonder what was happening to the Melbys. When he went to Newbridge for week-ends, Norman found her stretched on a wicker chair in one or other of the courtyards, following the sun and smiling to herself as her eyes travelled from the cot

beside her to the great house which, some day, its tiny occupant would own and from the house to the sloping meadows and hazy, tree-clad hills.

Life melted into a dream ; and time lost its meaning. One day Margery remembered standing, flanked by dream-figures and lulled by a droning voice that prayed for sanctification of water to the mystical washing away of sin ; with the abrupt injunction that her child should be named and with the drilled and timed response, 'Norman Edgar Andrew', she was conscious that others were trying to break in upon her secret life with her son ; but, as the chapel emptied and the house grew still, she reverted to her dream.

The papers lay neglected ; her letters, when she roused herself to read them, were answered for her ; and every caller was turned back at the gate-house. The Melbys might be reconciled ; Margery hoped faintly that they were, because it was dreadful for any one to be unhappy ; but she could not pretend to be interested in them until they were brought back into her life by the unexpected arrival of Freddie. A white speck appeared one afternoon against the green background of Poplar Ridge and grew gradually to the dimensions of a man walking alone and tossing a paper parcel in the air. Before she could hide, a distant voice greeted her ; and she saw him break into a run ; a minute later he was standing breathless on the far side of the moat.

"This is an unfair advantage, I'm not coming in," he called out. "But I felt I must offer you my congratulations and ask you to accept a small token of esteem for the son and heir. I've brought an old christening-mug, if you aren't already loaded up with such things. With love and all good wishes from Gloria and me. Can you catch ?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" Margery cried. "You must bring it round."

The dream was shattered, and her heart grew heavy at remembering that, a week before, she had received a gold cross with the words, "*With love from us both. Gloria M.*" The estrangement continued, then ; and both were trying, somewhat tardily, to conceal it.

"But you don't want to be bored with me," Freddie protested, checking on his way to the gate-house.

"I should love to see you. I'm all alone," answered Margery as she went to meet him. "Norman, with the vanity of man, can't imagine how I get through the day without him. I *do* . . . and it's always too short."

As they shook hands, Margery heard a faint sigh and found that Freddie's usual smile had deserted him.

"I can imagine," he murmured. "That's one of the things one learns on marrying. . . . Would you like me to give you some really good advice, Lady Cartwright?"

"I should like you, first of all, to cease calling me 'Lady Cartwright'. After that . . ."

"I've never dared before, though I always think of you as 'Margery'. My child, whatever happens, you mustn't repeat the mistake we made. I don't know what you've heard. . . . The trouble began when Judith was born. We . . . drifted ever so slightly apart and became ever so slightly critical of each other, so that, when a row came, we exaggerated it. I wouldn't give in; and Gloria walked out of the house. . . . You must never let Norman think that you're neglecting him for this young man."

"We know each other too well . . ." answered Margery. "But I'm miserable about you, Freddie. . . . If there's anything I can do . . ."

"I honestly don't know how we stand. There was some talk about an apology. If Gloria will apologize for insulting my guests, I'll apologize for anything she may think I've done."

"Meanwhile you're drifting. . . . You *must* make friends, Freddie."

"A man must be master in his own house."

At a change in his voice Margery looked up in time to see an obstinate frown in place of the customary ironical smile:

"I shouldn't think Gloria cares about being . . . mastered by anybody."

"A horse that's easy to break isn't worth breaking."

"But how's it going to end?"

"I suppose Gloria will want some money some time," said Freddie, looking stiffly ahead of him.

"You mean you'll *starve* her into submission?" Margery cried in horror.

"It sounds very brutal," he laughed, "but she's trying to bully me into submission with a scandal which is pretty nearly breaking my mother's heart. . . . And that's only the beginning of the trouble." Leaning towards Margery's chair, he caught her hand with a gesture of supplication, "I know, and Gloria knows, and *you'd* know, if you'd seen rather more of her, that, in the long run, she'd be utterly miserable if she won. Her antecedents . . . Women never admit these things, but she married me because she wanted to be ridden on a curb. You

know she was in love with Norman? Every one does ; but she knew he'd be too indulgent with her. . . . However, I didn't come here to inflict my troubles on you. I expect you have to rest before dinner, don't you ? ”

“ Oh, I've been resting all day, all this month.” Margery looked up with a frown half-timid and half-perplexed into the kindly, smiling face above her. “ If you're all by yourself, would it be a change to dine with me ? ”

“ A change . . . to the most delightful company . . . from the most damnable loneliness.”

“ I'll tell Manners ; and then . . . we *must* see if we can't patch something up between you and Gloria.”

When she returned from interviewing her butler, Margery was attracted to the drawing-room by the sound of music. Throughout her two months' dreaming, the piano had remained untouched ; and, after so much of her own company, her spirits bounded at the prospect of having some one to talk to her. Freddie was whistling a soft obbligato to his own playing. The slanting sun brought tiny wrinkles round his eyes as he turned to her ; she smiled back, as in old days she had smiled when Norman arrived unexpectedly to dinner in Cadogan Square.

“ It's only a picnic meal,” she apologized.

“ That's what I love. Margery, it's just occurred to me ; you don't think Norman will mind our dining like this ? ”

“ My *dear*, no ! But it was sweet of you to think of it. Tell me what you're playing.”

“ It's an old thing I wrote before the war. I don't think I ever gave it a name. . . . D'you care about caviare ? Well, a friend of mine has smuggled some through from Russia. If you're all by yourself, will you come over and sample it some night ? My mother will keep you in countenance.”

Dinner was announced before Margery had thought of going to dress ; and she started from her reverie to find that she had been wondering why she always disliked Freddie when he was away and liked him when they met. Once she had hated him for stealing Gloria and making Norman unhappy ; at all times she was inclined to see him through Norman's spectacles when Norman had been ruffled. In his rare moments of seriousness, he could be a charming companion ; and Margery so far forgot strict justice as to wonder how Gloria had been able to quarrel with any one so sympathetic. At dinner, his conversation glided from music to books, from books to pictures and from pictures to the countries where he had seen them in twenty years of careless rambling. His enviable ease of manner had a cosmopoli-

tan quality ; and he seemed equally at home in the life, the literature and the language of a dozen countries.

" I should love to see you and Norman travelling together," she laughed, with a sudden memory of their honeymoon. " He's the most ridiculously insular human being . . ."

" He's a funny fellow," interrupted Freddie. " But you mustn't disparage him, Margery. When I see you together, I feel you've won all that Gloria and I have missed . . . through our own dam' silly faults, if you'll pardon the word. *Our* marriage hasn't *begun* yet ; and I'm going to make a success of it or die in the attempt. *Your* marriage, by the way, is a half-and-half affair. I'm afraid you must miss Norman dreadfully."

" Well, I'm all right now and I'm going back to London as soon as I'm a bit stronger, but I don't know how I got through the time before my baby was born. I don't think . . . Norman realized . . . I'd never been alone before." Margery looked round the great dining-hall to the deep shadows at either end ; in such space the tiny table with its four shaded candles, the high-backed chairs and their own two persons seemed to be lost, and she found that she was speaking almost in a whisper. Loneliness, however, was not the worst of her discoveries : in the last year she had become so appallingly old. Norman still affected to enjoy her rare moments of " bubbling " ; but to " bubble " at Newbridge was like laughing in church. " It seemed so mean to leave daddy all alone that I sent my mother back for most of the time."

" You must come to Melby, if you feel lonely, though I can't undertake that you wouldn't be bored there."

" Oh, I should never be bored with you. You're such a dear ! And there are such thousands of things you can do and talk about."

Margery was on the point of adding that he and Gloria were the only people in the neighbourhood with whom she could talk freely. To Norman, naturally enough, this house was a kingdom ; she was his queen. It would be a relief, though, if she could sometimes lay aside her crown. The insignia and robes made her feel old ; and she now had a child of her own when, a moment before, she had been a child herself. Life was a very serious, responsible business. . . .

" You must come whenever you feel like it." To her surprise, Margery found him standing up with his hand outstretched in farewell. " Now I really don't feel justified in keeping you up a moment longer. I can't tell you how much good you've done me. Good-night ! Bless you ! Sleep well."

Bending quickly, he kissed her fingers and turned to the door. Margery whistled to her dogs and walked with him to the gatehouse. As his tall, white figure dwindled and disappeared among the trees on the dividing ridge, she tried to determine whether she was really grateful to him for coming. The friendly, unconventional dinner had been delightful ; but her two months' dreaming was at an end. His conversation made her hungry for companionship.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEWBRIDGE PARK AND MELBY COURT

MERCUTIO : . . . Thou ! why, thou wilt quarrel with a man that hath a hair more, or a hair less, in his beard than thou hast : thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes ; what eye, but such eye, would spy out such a quarrel ? thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg is full of meat, and yet thy head hath been beaten as addle as an egg for quarrelling : thou hast quarrelled with a man for coughing in the street, because he hath wakened thy dog that hath lain asleep in the sun : didst thou not fall out with a tailor for wearing his new doublet before Easter ? with another, for tying his new shoes with old riband ?

—SHAKESPEARE : *Romeo and Juliet*

I

WHEN Norman came to Newbridge for the week-end, he brought tidings, unadorned by comment, that he had travelled from Paddington to Gloucester with Gloria.

" Oh, I *do* hope that means they're friends again," Margery cried.

Then she paused to fit the information into the speech that had been preparing itself in her mind since her meeting with Freddie. Her loneliness, since he broke into her dream, made her dread the size of Newbridge and the length of the nights ; her instincts rebelled against a system that separated her from Norman for five days out of seven. Hitherto she had not dared to suggest a change for fear of seeming weak and fanciful : wholly against his inclination, Norman was continuing to work for her father lest any one should think that the accident of marrying an heiress had tempted him from his undertakings ; and her father acquiesced in this unnatural separation on the ground that Margery must train herself for the responsibilities of Newbridge. Every one, to her wistful apprehension, was acting from the most high-minded motives ; and no one derived the least satisfaction from them.

The last three days had introduced a new factor and given her an unanswerable case for coming to London if she could only pluck up courage to put it into words. Freddie had contented himself with a single call, which was described in her next letter to Norman; and she had not accepted his invitation to Melby, though Norman urged her to go. Her behaviour had been meticulously correct; and yet her conscience was uneasy. It would be uncandid to deny that for three days she had been disappointed at not seeing Freddie; and married women, however lonely, had no business to be disappointed at not seeing other women's husbands. Whenever the telephone-bell rang, she hoped for something less casual than a general invitation to dine some night if she felt bored. Put briefly, she was thinking too much about Freddie, who betrayed no interest in her; and if she remained idle-handed at Newbridge . . .

"She's come back for good," Norman continued; "but I wasn't told the peace terms: the Rainboroughs were in the carriage with us. By the way, I've committed you up to the neck with him over the war memorial." . . .

Though Margery asked to have the commitment explained, she listened with but half her attention. If Gloria was going to be at Melby, she was safe; there was no need even to worry about the night when Freddie kissed her hands and she felt that he wanted to kiss her lips; the night when she seemed so curiously uncertain of being able to resist him. He always gave her the impression of having never been resisted; and, when she recalled the inimitable strength and grace with which she had seen him clasping Gloria in old days before their quarrel, she understood for the first time what was meant when women were said to have made fools of themselves over men.

"Gloria's promised to work heart and soul, collecting money for the memorial," Norman concluded. "It's her best way of recovering the ground she lost after the cottage-hospital show. The official story, I understand, is that she's been nursing the admiral, who's in a pretty bad way. And I should think we could look for a big demonstration down here." . . .

The prophecy was hardly uttered when the butler announced that the Melbys had walked over and would like to come in if Margery and Norman were by themselves; it was fulfilled when Gloria's opening words framed an invitation for dinner any night that would suit them.

"And I want to see the boy," she added eagerly, slipping her arm round Margery's waist.

Though the eagerness sounded artificial, Margery admired

the courage which could banish all resentment that another woman had succeeded where Gloria had failed.

"He's a darling! My dear, I'm so glad everything went off all right!" Gloria cried, though she could not bring herself to linger by the cot. "You got my little present? Yes, I remember you wrote and thanked me for it. I'm afraid Freddie and I made fools of ourselves: I understand he gave another present on his own account. But you knew." . . .

"Everything's all right now, isn't it?" Margery asked gently.

"I hope so. Perhaps it's all for the best that we shan't see very much of each other. What with the bank and the House of Lords, Freddie will only be here for week-ends. He's suddenly discovered that he's marked out for public life! . . . I *had* to come back," she added, as though she were justifying herself. "I'm going to have another baby. At Christmas."

"Oh, my dear, I'm so glad! And this time I *do* hope . . ."

Margery stopped abruptly and walked downstairs in silence for fear that her good wishes might be mistaken for arrogance.

"That it'll be a boy? So do I," answered Gloria sombrely. "If other people can have boys. . . ," she added half to herself. "It'll make all the difference in the world to Freddie. He's just like his old father in that. I'm always so glad the old man died before *your* child was born. He'd never have forgiven you for having a boy when I didn't."

"If they knew what we had to go through, men might be less exacting."

"It's *going* to be a boy this time," Gloria proclaimed.

The men were pacing up and down beside the moat; and, as soon as Margery appeared, Freddie hurried to her with the eagerness which he always displayed in exchanging a man's company for a woman's:

"Have you decided which night you and Norman are coming? We never had our return picnic, Margie. And I *did* enjoy the other evening. Didn't you?"

Before Margery could answer, Gloria interrupted her conversation with Norman to say:

"It looks as though Sunday was the only possible night. We shall expect you then. Come along, Freddie; we must be getting home. I've had a tiring journey."

As she watched them disappearing into the park, Margery was reminded of a similarly abrupt departure on the morning when Gloria brought over her wedding-present and then dragged Freddie away the moment that she found him speaking to another woman. If he was a difficult husband, he had not married an easy wife.

The next evening, when Norman went upstairs to dress, he found laid on his bed a long coat and a dinner-jacket, on his table a white tie and a black.

"Did Gloria say if any one else would be there?" he called through the door of Margery's room. "Freddie always wears a short coat and a soft shirt when it's only the family."

"They can't have had time to collect a party," Margery called back. "But old Lady Melby is probably there; and they may have people for the week-end."

Forty minutes later, as the Newbridge car stopped fifty yards away from the door of Melby Court and then crept forward, Norman exclaimed:

"Just as well I put on full regimentals. This is a banquet!"

The party, on close inspection, was less remarkable for its size than for its nature. At twenty-four hours' notice, the Melbys had collected between thirty and forty people. Some of them had sworn, in Norman's hearing, that they would not enter Melby while old John Kendaile was alive; others, on Freddie's marriage, had waited for a lead; others again belonged to the despised and dull category of "old Gloucestershire worthies", at whom the young Kendales in their unregenerate days had mocked most unsparingly. All, without exception, had agreed to move warily when Freddie's escapade with the Russian dancer threatened to make them accomplices in a scandal.

In some way known to herself alone, Gloria had conquered or converted them, one after another. Clearly as if she had written it on her cards of invitation, this was a challenge to her neighbours; and her neighbours, in fear, pity or admiration, were unready to say that they would not meet her.

"This is really for you," she explained, as she kissed Margery; "as you've at last decided to come out of your shell. People were all saying they never saw anything of you. . . . How are you, Norman? How do you do, Lord Rainborough?"

Before he had time to be amused that Gloria should undertake to introduce his wife to the neighbourhood, Norman was claimed by Freddie to arbitrate between Lord Rainborough and himself about the Gloucestershire Light Infantry war-memorial. A school was to be built for soldiers' children born in the county; Lord Rainborough had promised a site; some one else had now to collect the money. The Melbys, Norman gathered, had been approached some days before; but Freddie insisted that the inaugural meeting at least should be held at Newbridge.

"I'll run the executive committee, if you like," he promised. "But it's not even my regiment; and in view of the Cartwright connection with this part of the world . . ."

Though Norman looked for irony, he found only diffidence and good-will. The preliminary arrangements were concluded before the end of dinner; and, a fortnight later, a representative meeting took place in the library of Newbridge. When the committee had been elected, Norman's duties were restricted to asking Prince William, the colonel-in-chief of the regiment, to become president of the fund; thereafter he only heard of the Tapley Memorial School as one of the Melbys' multifarious activities. On Friday afternoons and Monday mornings, Paddington and Gloucester were thronged with such of Gloria's guests as did not come by road; *The Times* recorded the more exalted of those who stayed with her, the local papers chronicled the rest.

"You know the Kendaille arms?" asked Mrs. St. John, as they travelled down together one week-end. "Or, three mushrooms *argent*; and, for device, *Excelsior*. . . . Gloria's certainly getting on."

"Freddie's an extraordinarily good host," Norman answered, without allowing himself to be drawn into criticism. "He has so thoroughly studied the art of living. I'm told he keeps a box at the Metropolitan Opera House on the chance of being in New York one night in three years; and once, when I dined with him in Paris, I found he had a private cellar at his favourite hotel."

"He certainly knows how to spend money better than most people. I always tell Gloria she's living in silver-gilt splendour. I wonder how long it will last."

"I should think . . . they suit each other . . . uncommonly well," Norman answered dispassionately.

"It's one of the most exciting marriages I've ever watched," Mrs. St. John answered with an eagerness in her wizened face that made her look like a malevolent witch. "Freddie's playing this social game just to please her. *And* the business game. *And* the House of Lords game. He hasn't won her yet. *And*, when he has, I don't know what he'll do with her. He doesn't want a wife and wouldn't understand one; but he'd like to turn Gloria into a wonderful kind of mistress: beautiful, amusing, never the same two minutes together . . . and utterly enslaved to him. *We're* the only thing that interests Freddie: women. I've known him ever since he was a boy; he's been playing an immense game. Some day . . . I suppose some day poor Gloria will find she's only a single piece in *his* game. He's a hunter. *And* quite unscrupulous."

"He and Gloria seem to be working miracles for this memorial fund," Norman interposed in a final effort to avoid discussing his neighbours.

"That's part of Gloria's game. Or so she thinks. And Freddie lets her think so," Mrs. St. John rejoined darkly.

At every meeting of the executive committee, more bewildering tales were told of Lady Melby's energies. All the money required was subscribed in less than half the estimated time; and, as soon as Prince William promised to lay the foundation-stone, Gloria soared into dazzling projects for a luncheon to all the subscribers, a tea to the widows and children and a review of the regiment by its colonel-in-chief.

"I sometimes wish she wouldn't talk quite so much about 'my school'," Lady Rainborough confided to Margery at the end of one meeting. "After all, you've put up half the money; and Charlie presented *all* the land."

"But she *has* worked *wonderfully*," answered Margery. "And she's full of new schemes if the prince can be persuaded to stay the week-end. I must remember to write and find out if Norman can arrange that."

Three days later, Margery drove in haste to Tapley Court and, without other comment than a face of woe, handed Lady Rainborough the reply which she had received from Norman:

"I have just seen Marriott and heard the prince's views. We're in a very difficult position. When H.H. was asked to fix the date, he assumed that he was coming not to Melby but to Newbridge! He used to stay there quite a lot with my father. It was frightfully invidious, but I did suggest that it would give great gratification if he went to Melby, as Gloria had been running the whole memorial. The moment I mentioned the name, however, I felt I'd stirred up a hornets' nest. Absolutely between ourselves, the Melbys are exceedingly mal vu in certain quarters. The scandal after Princess Georgiana's visit seems to have been repeated; and there's a strong feeling that no respectable person can be asked to a house where every one's living with some one else's wife. I assured Marriott that was utter nonsense, but he says the prince mustn't be put in the position of having to hint that he would rather not stay at Melby. The only excuse I can think of for Gloria is that he knows Newbridge so well and is coming for old sake's sake. This will be delicate enough, Heaven knows; but it will be far more difficult to explain that—things being as they are—the Melbys ought not to make too much of a private display."

Lady Rainborough handed back the letter with a shrug of resignation that suggested no regret for the Melbys' plight :

"Nothing you can say will stop them. They're ostentatious by nature. But you'd better see how far things have gone."

Half an hour later, Margery telegraphed to London :

"Dinner invitations already sent out can nothing be done?"

"Decision irrevocable, smoothe things as best you can," Norman replied.

The fruits of Margery's diplomacy and Gloria's good sense were revealed when the Melbys walked over to luncheon the following Sunday. With a wrinkled forehead but with a tranquil voice, Gloria begged Norman for help in the final arrangements :

"Major Marriott says that the prince is coming on the Thursday afternoon. He'll dine with you here, sleep here, not very anxious for a large party, as he'll have had a very hard ten days in Wales. . . . Then, on the day itself, luncheon to meet the committee . . ." Gloria raised her head and looked Norman in the eyes without difficulty. "Major Marriott thinks it would be less tiring to have the luncheon here; so will you or Margery switch the people over from Melby? I can give you a list of their names." She folded up the letter and put it into her bag. "I hoped he was going to stay a second night so that he could meet some of the people, outside the committee, who've been working for the fund. I'll tell every one not to expect him; but the dinner may as well go on, and of course you and Margery will come. Oh, the tea for the widows and orphans: Major Marriott suggests that, as the foundation-stone is being laid within sight of Tapley, it would be a saving of time if Lord Rainborough gave the tea, instead of having it at Melby. We . . . we can go forward on those lines," she concluded vaguely.

When they were by themselves, Margery turned to Norman with tears in her eyes :

"It's a *shame!* After *all* she's done . . ."

"It's a most unfortunate business, though she took it splendidly. . . . But, Margie, what an idiot she was to invite people before she'd found out what the prince wanted to do!" The one thing that the prince wanted to do, apparently, was to avoid Melby even for a visit of ten minutes, even during a public tea to widows and orphans. "Now every one will say 'like father, like son.' The old Kendailles tried to carry everything with a high hand when they first came here." . . .

"They're saying it now! Lady Rainborough was thoroughly pleased at the set-back. . . . Poor Gloria!"

"Poor us! We shall get the credit of it. . . . I wish I'd never touched the damned thing." . . .

3

"The least we can do," Margery and Norman agreed at short intervals throughout that week-end, "is to keep the thing as simple as possible." . . .

Both were to find, during the next few weeks, that it was easier for them to observe this resolution than to keep others from breaking it on their behalf. In the illustrated papers Norman came upon photographs of "*Newbridge Park, Gloucester, where H.H. Prince William is to be the guest of Sir Norman Cartwright for the inauguration of the Tapley Memorial School,*" photographs of "*Sir Norman Cartwright, who will be the host of H. H. Prince William at Newbridge Park*" and photographs of "*Lady Cartwright, wife of Sir Norman Cartwright, who is entertaining H.H. Prince William at Newbridge Park, Gloucester.*" In papers devoted to fashionable news he read blatant misdescriptions of himself, his house and his hereditary position in Gloucestershire; in local papers he was reminded of Prince William's earlier visits to Newbridge; and, as the inauguration-day drew near, metropolitan and provincial papers united to state that H.H. Prince William was "*of course*" staying with Sir Norman and Lady Cartwright at Newbridge Park.

"As though there weren't *fifty* other houses he could have gone to," Norman cried. "And not a word about Rainborough who started the whole scheme and presented the land. No mention even of the architect's name."

With the arrival of the prince, Margery and he became too busy to watch for any psychological by-play. The members of the committee, with the Melbys at their head, assembled in the drawing-room and were presented, one after another; on learning that Freddie had been chairman of the committee, the prince offered him cordial congratulations on his success; a moment later, the doors were thrown open, and Margery led the way into the dining-room. It was only as they settled to their places that any one had time to contrast this meeting, with Margery on the prince's right hand, with the one which Gloria, now in the discreet distance of the table's end, had contrived for herself. Though there was no hint of secret resentment, Norman

laboured through the afternoon with a sense of guilt superimposed on his other responsibilities.

"I think we may flatter ourselves that everything went off without a hitch," he sighed, when he returned from Gloucester station to find Margery resting before dinner.

"The worst is still to come," she answered in miserable anticipation of the dinner at Melby Court. "I suppose they'll all be there!" she broke out with unwonted fierceness. "The people who were saying, a few months ago, how *delightful* it was to have such a *charming* woman to entertain at *dear* Melby! The people who dropped her like a hot coal the moment some one from outside shifted the lime-light on to us." . . .

"You can't go about making fun of 'old Gloucestershire worthies' . . ." Norman ventured.

"One Gloria is equal to all the rest of them put together! Going on with this dinner, when she's been blotted out, when she knows it, when nobody troubles to hide it from her. . . . It's like being present at your own funeral."

"Don't you think you're perhaps making things out worse than they are?"

"I'm a woman. I know what I should have felt if anything had gone wrong to-day, I can imagine what it feels like to have your pride *trampled* on." . . .

Whatever Gloria's feelings, she did not betray them. As at the first dinner after her secession to London, she dominated her echoing, crowded drawing-room with impenetrable assurance; Margery, on arrival, was greeted with an affectionate: "*Darling, it is sweet of you to come! I do hope you're not too terribly tired. Everything went off quite wonderfully, I thought*"; of the prince's return to London she would only say: "I hoped very much that he might be persuaded to stay for dinner here, but he had to get back." . . .

Of the others who dined that night, Freddie preserved his accustomed manner of the flawless attentive host, with his usual expression of ironical, detached amusement.

"Now that the captains and the kings have departed, I hope we shall see a little of you," he murmured to Margery as they went in.

"My dear Freddie, you've been seeing me four times a week at least for the last three months," she laughed.

"At committees. That was only enough to tantalize."

As he awaited a reproof that was sweeter than the flattery of other people, Freddie saw her forehead puckering with sudden resolution.

"I want to talk to you . . . alone," she whispered. "Norman mustn't know, because he wouldn't approve; and Gloria mustn't know, or she'd hate me. Can you arrange that?"

Careful to keep all surprise out of his expression, Freddie nodded gravely:

"We've only to slip away into the garden."

"I'll come as soon as you give me the signal."

4

An hour later they met casually by an open window and strolled away from the noise and light of the house to a wooden seat overlooking the tennis-court. After the conspiratorial language of her invitation, Freddie was interested to see that Margery betrayed no embarrassment; her arm slipped through his, as she trod through the darkness, from terrace to terrace, with the dainty caution of a small cat; and she opened her explanation with a confiding touch of her fingers on his wrist:

"I shan't tell Norman about this, because he didn't want me to say anything. And whether you'll be able to tell Gloria I don't know. I just felt I couldn't sit still and say nothing. Freddie, it's been horrid for you to-day, I know; but it's been every bit as horrid for us."

The pain in her voice emboldened him to take her hand:

"My child, don't worry about *me*. Tell me what's been upsetting you."

"You *know*, Freddie! After all you and Gloria had done, it was *horrid* not to give you the credit! But it wasn't our fault." . . .

"I know it wasn't!"

"Gloria must know it too!"

"She does. I'm certain . . . though she hasn't said anything to me. We've not discussed it."

"She feels it all the same," Margery sighed.

"Yes." Freddie raised the hand that he was holding and kissed it. "And what a loving, understanding little heart you have, Margie, to think of that!"

"But I'm devoted to Gloria!"

"In the distress of our best friends we always find something that does not displease us.' But you're an exception to most of Rochefoucauld's rules," he added, as he took possession of her other hand. "An exception to all the bitter things that soured men have said about life and the world. Bitterness only spices life for jaded palates. It's love . . . love that's the food of

life. If the epigrammatists had given a thousandth part of their energy to understanding their fellow-creatures instead of telling witty lies about them, how much more love there would be in the world and how much more smoothly it would run. . . . I'll stake my life that Gloria didn't give herself away. You're a sympathetic child, Margie."

"It didn't require so *very* much imagination."

"So few people have any. . . . That's why I love talking to you, being with you; I feel we share an extra sense. And I feel you have such a white little soul and such a tender little heart. . . . Are you going to say anything to Gloria?" he asked unhurriedly, before she could check his outspoken admiration.

"I'm afraid it's too difficult. . . . *You* may, if you think it can be done. . . . I hope it can. . . . When I think of her to-night, so sweet and smiling and brave. . . ."

The discovery that her voice was trembling and that her eyes had filled with tears made Margery turn away with her sentence unfinished. Her nerves seemed to have snapped; and she felt utterly exhausted.

"Gloria never cries when she's hurt," said Freddie. "And you. . . . Dear little Margie, you're so soft-hearted that you cry if *anybody's* hurt." Drawing her to him, he brushed her long lashes with his handkerchief and, as her head rested unresistingly against his shoulder, he bent down and kissed her cheek. "Gloria *shall* know. . . . I'm touched," he whispered as he sat watching for a change in her attitude. "Why didn't Norman want you to say anything?"

"Perhaps he thought you wouldn't understand," Margery answered, looking mistily ahead of her, as though unconscious that his lips had touched her cheek. "Perhaps he didn't quite understand what it meant to Gloria."

"But *we* understand. . . . We understand each other so well. . . . Ought we to be going back, do you think?"

The abrupt, practical question drove the mist from Margery's mind. Vaguely she had been feeling that Freddie would want to prolong this pleasant new intimacy and that she would have to cut it short. In this understanding mood, when he put off his irony and mischief, she liked him; his lips had indeed touched her cheek, but it was as though her father had kissed her.

"I suppose we ought. . . . I had to speak, Freddie; I shouldn't have been able to sleep, otherwise."

"Poor little child, you're half asleep now! Your eyes are quite black! It's time you were in bed. . . . I'm glad you said what you did."

"I *knew* you'd understand."

Hardly realizing what she was doing, Margery turned her face to him. This time the kiss was longer; and he could feel the warm flutter of her lips.

"Poor tired child, I'm going to carry you up to the house," he whispered.

Margery found herself being borne drowsily in a strong, gentle embrace. Before reaching the last terrace, he kissed her again and lowered her gently to the ground. The house, as they drew near to it, seemed garishly brilliant and noisy, but Margery was so sleepy that she took no account of anything that did not touch her closely. Freddie was still holding her hand; his warm grip sent a thrill through her, so that her fingers tightened round his; vaguely she realized that she must throw off this trance.

"I am . . . most extraordinarily . . . tired," she announced with an effort.

"I'm going to tell Norman to take you home. If we go in by the front door, we shall avoid all the people. I'll order your car, and you'd better not try to say good-bye to any one."

A moment later, Margery found herself alone in the hall; yet another moment later, one of the maids arrived with her cloak; then Norman hurried up with anxiety in his eyes, and she roused at the sound of Freddie's voice, smoothly reassuring, behind him:

"She's only a little tired. It's not to be wondered at."

"I'm only a little tired," she repeated mechanically. "It's not to be wondered at."

As the car came to the door, Norman helped her to her feet; and, with Freddie on her other side, all three passed into the night.

"I hope you'll be all right to-morrow," fell soothingly on her drowsy hearing. "May I come to enquire?"

"Do! But I shall be quite all right."

"I hope so."

As they wound swiftly along the sinuous road between Melby and Newbridge, Norman tried to find out whether she was faint or in pain; but his solicitous questions struck jarringly on her dream-wrapped senses, and she would only smile and urge him to silence with a gentle movement of her head.

At the first bend of the drive she turned for a last look at the house and saw Freddie silhouetted in the light of the open front-door. He waved perfunctorily; and, as he faced the light and re-entered the house, his face had regained its old ironical smile.

BOOK THREE



CHAPTER ONE

ST. MARTIN'S SUMMER

Have mercy, Jesu !—Soft ! I did but dream
O coward conscience, how thou dost afflict me !
The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh. . . .
Is there a murderer here ? No. Yes, I am :
Then fly. What, from myself ? Great reason why—
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself ?
Alack, I love myself. Wherefore ? for any good
That I myself have done unto myself ?
Oh, no ! alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself !
I am a villain : yet I lie, I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well : fool, do not flatter.
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury in the high'st degree ;
Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree,
All several sins, all used in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying ' Guilty ! guilty ! '
I shall despair. There is no creature loves me ;
And if I die, no soul will pity me :
Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself ?

—SHAKESPEARE : *Richard III.*

I

OVER Newbridge Park and Melby Court, the late summer descended deliberately like night upon a field of battle. After the excitement of Prince William's visit no one seemed able to muster energy for a new effort. Margery's health and his own commitments in London decided Norman to forgo even his usual shooting-parties, though Colonel Swan and Sir Hilary Thorpe came over for three days at the beginning of September. At Gloria's bidding, Freddie spent the week between Westminster and Birmingham. Their neighbours relapsed contentedly into slumber ;

and the social life of the neighbourhood degenerated into weekly dinner-parties of four at Melby and Newbridge alternately.

Norman was under standing orders to leave for Belgium at forty-eight hours' notice ; and Margery stayed in the country with her child until she should be told whether she was to accompany her husband abroad. Freddie, as he had promised, called on the day after her sudden, curious faintness and continued to call whenever he found a new book to amuse her. Without these visits, Margery felt she would not have known how to support the loneliness of the house for five days out of seven ; but, since the catastrophe over the Russian dancer, still more since that queer time when she caught herself enjoying his society too much, she was scrupulous to guard against Gloria's quick jealousy. Herein she was aided by Freddie, who told her that he was trying whole-heartedly to bury the past ; and, when his calls became fewer and shorter, she never hinted her need for companionship.

" This is my home. I knew that when I married," Margery argued, though she sometimes wondered wistfully if her predecessors in the long gallery had been wooed fiercely, watched tenderly and then left to their appointed task of training a son in the Cartwright tradition. " I suppose it's all right, but I wish men hadn't such a terrible sense of duty."

Then she remembered that next day she would be twenty-one ; and a miserable desire to cry was so strong that she ran across the park in the hope of finding that Gloria was walking to meet her.

There was no one in sight, when she reached the long green tunnel through the woods ; and she turned back without crossing the boundary. At the gate-house, her butler informed her that Lord Melby had called ; and Margery was startled to realize that she had divined what the announcement would be before it was made.

" Is he still here ? " she asked, though she knew that Freddie was within a few yards of her, even as she now knew why she had hurried home from Poplar Ridge.

" He is in the drawing-room, my lady."

Margery put away her stick and gloves with studied deliberation, brooding over her presentiment and wondering when it had come to her. Unless Freddie had received a telepathic

summons, he could not have chanced on a day when he was more welcome.

"This is nice!" she exclaimed in greeting. "I was feeling so blue."

Freddie came forward from the table where he was idly turning over her books; and, at his old, kindly smile, Margery felt her depression being charmed away. The touch of his hand sent a shock up her arm; and, after the chill of an autumn evening, she felt suddenly warm.

"I come charged with a message from Gloria," he explained. "Her best love, and she hopes you know that we're expecting you and Norman to dinner on Saturday."

"We should love to come, if Norman's down here," Margery answered. "I had a letter this morning to say that father wants him to go off to Belgium quite soon for some of the reconstruction work there."

"Will he be away long?" Freddie asked, allowing his eyes to travel round the room and to light up in a smile as he saw the piano standing open.

"Not more than a month, I expect. He doesn't think it's worth uprooting me. . . . Are you going to play me something?"

"This is what you were asking me about the other day. . . . Well, it's some time ago now. . . . And you've had the tuner since I was last here."

"The man came . . . why, it's nearly three weeks ago!" Margery cried in surprise. "Haven't you been here since then?"

"Not like this . . . just to see you." His fingers ran idly over the keys for a moment, and he turned his head slowly until he was looking away from her out of the window. "You made me think I wasn't wanted."

"Freddie! What did I say?" she cried in consternation.

"Nothing! I don't mean that. . . . You were charming, as you always are. But I thought you were . . . not at your ease. I can't talk and play," he added in timely diversion as Margery flushed uncomfortably. "We must wait till you come to Melby; I have the music there. Well, may I tell Gloria that you'll come in any case and that you'll bring Norman if he's down here?"

As he stood up, smiling down on her, Margery's uncontrollable instinct for truth told her that she had indeed been embarrassed at their last meeting and that she was now in danger of letting slip yet one more opportunity for candour; next time she might not even try to seize it.

"Yes, if you don't mind my leaving it like that," she answered. "Freddie, you're quite right: I *was* rather uncomfortable." . . .

"With *me*? You funny child! And I thought we understood each other so perfectly!"

A gentle softening of tone brought back memories of the night when she had sat leaning against his shoulder, with his arm round her, until he bent down and kissed her without let or protest.

"I . . . think we do," Margery agreed, to gain time.

"I *hope* I've not . . . outstayed my welcome?"

Held to the line, she summoned her courage for the challenge which she had been harbouring:

"I loved to see you then, I always do. But I . . . couldn't help wondering whether Gloria liked your coming here so much."

"I never told her."

"But, Freddie . . . oughtn't you to?"

Catching her two hands, he looked down on her flushed and troubled face:

"No. . . . I'll give up coming, if you tell me I must; but it would only do harm if she knew. I'm quite sure you haven't told Norman; and it would only do harm if *he* knew. They wouldn't understand. . . . Darling child, don't you see that's why I love being with you? I've never tried to make love to you, have I?" He waited until she looked him in the eyes and shook her head. "You have a devoted husband and you're in love with him; I'm in love with Gloria and I should say she was devoted to me if that didn't sound so terribly conceited. Between us, Margie, there's just a very wonderful sympathy and understanding; to make a flirtation of it would be *sacrilege*, to tell anybody else would shatter it. I feel such love and reverence for you that I'll stay away for ever if you feel I oughtn't to come. I hope you won't make me do that. In the course of my misspent life I've met dozens of women who've attracted me, five or six who interested me, one or two who combined beauty of mind with beauty of body. . . . Gloria . . . The shifts and changes of her brain are like the most dazzling April weather. . . . But I've never been attracted by any one's *spirit* as I have been by yours; when I'm with you, I feel there's a union of souls. You don't suggest that I'm being unfaithful to Gloria because I realize that?"

"N-no." Margery was conscious that her mind had not kept pace with his facile utterance. Her father teased her for being such a baby; Norman shewed her the tenderest consideration, as

a child ; and she could not readily believe in this sympathetic understanding which Freddie affected to find in her. "No, but I'm just like every one else."

"What a wonderful world it would be if every one else were like you !" he laughed. "I see the difference, if you don't. And that's why there'd only be misunderstanding if Gloria, if *Norman*, who's the most level-headed fellow I know, heard that I dropped in here for no apparent reason whenever I felt out of tune with the world and wanted to be put right, . . . like that piano. But . . . say the word ; and I'll give up coming."

Margery had herself been feeling so much out of tune that she hesitated to deny herself the sense of well-being which Freddie always gave her. It was hardly possible to convince Norman or Gloria that he could talk alone to any woman without flirting, though in fact he was almost morbidly anxious not to compromise her. The first time they dined together, he was careful to ask, knowing Norman's strict conventionality, whether he would object ; throughout their friendship, he was ready to withdraw the moment she felt any constraint in his presence.

"I don't want you to do that," she answered.

"Bless you !"

With a movement too quick for her to counter, he lifted her almost off her feet and kissed her. The shock which she had felt when he touched her hand passed through her body and paralysed her. Physical pain, impossible to locate and almost impossible to bear, made her giddy ; and, though she could not struggle, she wanted to tell him savagely that she hated him. Norman would be amazed, Gloria enraged ; yet neither so much enraged or amazed as she was at being robbed of something that belonged to Norman. Nevertheless, her anger could find no words : when once Freddie began to argue, she could not explain why he must not kiss her now when she had kissed him of her own accord before.

"Freddie, you mustn't !" she protested.

"Why not ?"

"If any one came in !"

"No one will come in."

"Oh, please let me go !"

As he relaxed his grasp, Margery smoothed her dress to avoid meeting his eyes. Now that he had set her at liberty, her anger was evaporating ; but a new fear came to mingle with her vague regret that she had spoken sharply or, perhaps, that she had not spoken sooner. The giddiness, too, remained ; and, losing all initiative, she waited to see what he would do next.

"I must be getting home. Will you walk with me as far as Poplar Ridge?" Freddie asked.

As he took a step towards the door, Margery recollected that she had been on the point of telling him that it was time for her to dress for dinner. Now, instead of dismissing him, she nodded without speaking and walked quickly ahead of him through the hall. He was making her late for dinner; but, until her initiative returned, she could do nothing against him. That perhaps, did not matter so long as he did nothing against her. They traversed half the park in silence; and, when Freddie broke it, he only commented on the changing autumn colours of the trees in front of them. Reaching the gate, he vaulted over and stood facing her with his hands on the top rail.

"Bless you!" he whispered.

"Good-bye, Freddie. My love to Gloria." As though she were waking from sleep, Margery goaded her mind to activity. "I'll . . . I'll let her know as soon as I hear from Norman."

"Kiss me good-bye."

"No!"

"But why not?"

"Because . . . I don't know. . . . I have once."

"That was so long ago! Won't you again? Please!"

With halting steps and lowered eyes Margery approached the gate and did as she was bidden. What was innocent a month earlier was innocent still; and yet everything had changed. Nevertheless, when he looked at her in a certain way, when his voice fell into a certain cadence, above all when his hands sent that thrill through her body, she seemed unable to resist him.

Stepping back from the gate, she prayed with all her strength that he would not order her to stay. Once within the protection of the house, she could tell Manners that nobody was to be admitted; with her child to engage her by day, her dogs to protect her at night, she could fight down this feeling that she was being drawn, against her will, to these perilous Melby woods. When Norman came, he must take her back to London; and, at her next meeting with Freddie, she must be unassailable.

At the thought of him, Margery turned and looked back to the gate. He was still in sight, leaning against it, watching her as she ran.

Throughout dinner, the undefined pain kept her from eating, and she ordered bread and milk to be sent to her room. Instead of going to bed, however, she walked restlessly about the house, lingering long by the cot of her sleeping son; and, when the nurse

returned from her supper, she began a letter to Norman and left it unfinished.

Midnight was striking when she went to bed ; but she did not fall asleep until after daybreak.

3

When Norman arrived for the week-end, he announced that he had received his sailing-orders for the following Wednesday.

"It's hardly worth your while to come with me, but you might shift to Cadogan Square till I get back," he added. "It'll be very lonely here." . . .

Though she knew her nerves to be deranged, Margery felt herself growing hot with anger, for the first time since their marriage, at his lordly habit of regarding her only as an incident in his own life. So long as he came to her for two days a week, she could get through the other five as best she might ; from the moment when she married him, she could be catalogued and pushed into place, like a new book in the library.

"If you're . . . only going to be away . . . a month," she faltered in hateful endeavour to hurt him, "it won't be very different from the last . . . *eight*."

"You won't have the Melbys to break the monotony," Norman answered impenetrably. "I'm afraid the old admiral's pretty bad. He's been moved into a nursing-home, and I hear an operation is threatened. Freddie tells me that Gloria's taken rooms in an hotel near the nursing-home, and they're going up on Monday."

Margery forgot her resentment in flooding relief that she could remain at Newbridge without the alternate yearning and dread of the last weeks. Loneliness was a thing to overcome, unless she consented to be a helpless encumbrance to her husband ; but self-discipline was easier to practise when there was no temptation daily at hand. Talking to Freddie was like assuaging thirst with salt water. She could not feel lonely if she stirred herself for the long-delayed task of calling at every cottage on the estate, as Norman had urged in a tone that was growing gradually reproachful.

"I'll stay here . . . for the present," she told him. "After all, I can go up to London any time, if I feel bored."

How great was her relief she only knew on Monday morning, when she saw the Melby car unloading at the station and met Gloria on the platform. When Freddie joined them, she greeted

him without self-consciousness ; later, as the train disappeared from sight, with a last flutter of Norman's handkerchief, she returned home in peace of mind. That evening, when her child had been put to bed, she was able to exercise her dogs in the park without once looking towards the sentinel line of black poplars ; she could read in the courtyard without the least fear of being hailed from the other side of the moat. When her letters were brought to her in the morning, she knew that there was nothing for Freddie to say ; had he written, she would not have recognized his handwriting. And, were she tempted to think of him, there was now enough work to keep her thoughts better occupied.

It had been a strange experience, this brush with a personality stronger than her own. She did not want to think about it.

For the whole of three mornings, Margery tramped, in short skirt and brogues, from one cottage to another. Throughout the summer she had been looking forward to visiting again these smiling, soft-spoken people ; but Norman or her nurse was always at hand to discourage all exertion. Now, as though Freddie's departure had restored her strength of body and mind, she felt that nothing could tire her. The welcome at each door warmed her heart. Every one wanted to know about her baby ; and Margery felt herself being received into the oldest and greatest secret society on the world.

When she returned footsore and healthily tired, there was still a daily report to be written for Norman ; and, in the work of her regency, she found a ready cure for the fancies of convalescence.

" You'll have to speak sharply to the Blakes if you see no improvement," Norman wrote at the end of the week. *" The man's a decent enough fellow, but that wife of his always has had a taste for drink, and, if he can't pull her up, he'd better pay his wages over to his daughter. . . . I shan't put the Mallorys into a new cottage till they've learnt to keep themselves clean. . . . I've thought for a long time that old Mrs. Fenner should have one of her grandchildren living with her : she's stone-deaf, very cloudy in the head, and I'm in terror that she'll burn the place down some fine day—and herself with it." . . .*

In eight pages of proposals and instructions, Margery found material for a week's work.

" Though a *perfect* gentleman would have said how much he was missing me," she added.

It was absurd to feel hurt, however. Norman was naturally

undemonstrative and assumed that she took his love as much for granted as he took for granted her adequacy for the part of wife to himself, mother to his son and mistress of Newbridge. Since their engagement, he could no more shew affection than she could beg for it. Her father had warned her that, when a man had been deeply hurt by one woman, he might be fearful of exposing himself to another. . . .

"The Blakes, . . . then the Mallorys. I must leave Mrs. Fenner till to-morrow."

It ought not to be so very hard to shew affection when you felt it! There were moments when Margery longed for Norman to make a fuss of her; the house would not seem half so big and empty if he would just write "*I hope the house doesn't seem so very big and empty. I've had to leave you alone an awful lot; but it couldn't very well be helped, and you've been wonderfully plucky and patient. A quarter of the time's gone! I shall soon be back.*". . . With no hint of encouragement, Margery found no incentive to go about her daily work. One cottage was very like another; every family seemed to contain the same number of the same children; the same mothers described with the same garrulity the same ailments in the same grandmothers. And, though Margery loved visiting them, she could not intrude upon them daily.

"If I'm not careful, I shall become thoroughly dissatisfied," she warned herself. "But if we *could*, just occasionally, go back to the old Cadogan Square days! Norman's a Cartwright before he's my husband. And he's the custodian of this place before he's a flesh-and-blood man. He only bothered to have a child because this place will some day need some one else to look after it; he only bothered to marry me because he wanted to have a child." A new thought urged her into the picture-gallery. "I suppose all these good ladies had to go through with it in their time, though it probably came natural to them in those days. My mamma-in-law didn't; she just found she couldn't stand it. I wonder if that's why they never had her hung up here. That would be about the worst punishment a Cartwright could think of; I'm sure, if I ever make Norman angry, I shall be hidden away in a garret or turned with my face to the wall." . . .

She was still walking up and down the gallery when her dogs came to beg dumbly for exercise and companionship. Now that she could think of Melby without being drawn to it against her will, Margery determined to enquire whether Gloria had sent any news of her father's operation. Though London-bred, she walked unconcernedly among the phantom, startled forms of

cattle and horses ; every creak and whisper of the autumn dusk was by now familiar to her ; and for ghosts of the imagination she had no heed to spare as she wrenched open the gate on the hilltop. Her course, unfaltering and straight as in an ordeal by fire, carried her along the well-known bridle-path, now scantily roofed with yellowing leaves ; and, when she checked, it was at the sound of a liquid, low whistle too human for fancy to explain.

4

"Hullo?" Her heart beat quicker as she paused to peer through the fading twilight. "Is any one there?"

"Margie! It's me! I didn't want to frighten you."

"Freddie!"

"I arrived this evening. London's in a pea-soup fog ; and I thought I should like a breath of fresh air." . . .

From the shade of the trees emerged the deeper shade of a man in dark clothes, his face only marked by the gleam of his teeth and eyes when he smiled.

"I . . . I was coming to see your mother," Margery stammered. "I had no idea you were down here."

"I only decided to come at lunch-time. It was an impulse. One should always follow an impulse."

"Is Gloria here?"

"No. The admiral's very ill. It will be his last illness."

"Oh, I'm *sorry*!"

In the shadows Margery heard a gentle laugh :

"He's a precious scamp. If his daughter doesn't pretend to feel any great affection for him, I don't think I need. I came here to forget him. . . . How are you, Margie, and what have you been doing with yourself?"

"I'm very well, thanks. Terribly busy. Is Lady Melby in? I feel so rude, because she's several times asked me to come and see her, but I've always been engaged. It's really too late now . . ."

As she spoke, Margery took a tentative half-step forward ; but, as Freddie did not move, it only brought her nearer to him.

"Don't run away the moment we've met," he urged. "I've come a long way to see you."

"My dear, you know perfectly well you didn't come to see *me*!"

"But I did! I pretended I wanted to collect some papers for my solicitor. . . . I was out of tune again ; I hadn't seen you for so long, Margie, and I knew that you were the only

person who could put me right. I hoped you would invite me to another picnic dinner."

As his voice sank to a wheedling caress, Margery summoned all her resolution to resist him :

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Freddie."

"Why not?"

"I'm all alone."

"But I've dined with you alone before now. I wouldn't have presumed to invite myself, if you hadn't invited me before." As he paused, Margery detached herself to admire his skill in making her responsible for every new step in this now terrifying intimacy. When she tried to protest that it was wrong for them to meet, to dine alone, even to kiss, he could always ask whether it had become wrong since she gave him a lead. Her name was 'Margery'; only Norman was allowed to call her 'Margie'; and yet she had asked Freddie to drop the 'Lady Cartwright'. "It's impossible to talk if there are other people present," he continued. "Otherwise we'd have a *partie à trois* with my mother. Margie, I'm only here for one night."

"I'm afraid it's impossible, Freddie."

"Why has it *become* impossible?"

Though she was expecting the question, Margery felt that a man of chivalry would not have asked it :

"Well, you can do a thing *once*, by a sort of accident. If you go on doing it, it becomes a habit."

"And what if it does?" he laughed.

"Well, if you force me to say it: I don't *want* to make a habit of it."

Though she could hardly see him, she was conscious that the deeper shadow which represented him had moved aside.

"I'm sorry. . . . I wish you'd told me that before. . . . You'll do me the justice to remember that I said I'd never come to Newbridge again if you'd prefer me not to. I wish you'd let me go when I offered to. One doesn't like to be . . . dismissed."

"But I'm not dismissing you!" she cried in dismay at his tone of stiff grievance and in terror that he would charge her next with encouraging him against his better judgement. "Freddie, you mustn't be angry with me, I won't allow it. If you want to see me, *I'll* dine with *you*."

"That's not the same thing. I want to talk to you alone."

"I'm afraid I can't alter what I've said. And it's not like you to press me when I've said 'no' once." . . . Receiving no answer, Margery tried again to pass him; but by now he was once more standing athwart her path. "Turn back with me to

the house," she suggested. "You can say all you like to me then without being interrupted."

"Not *that!* Please! If I can't come to see you in your own house, I'll bow to my fate; the other is *rather* too much like rustic lovers walking out."

"You can come and see me to-morrow *morning*, if you like," she proposed, resolute not to be offended by his ill-humour. "It's this dining together when Gloria's in London and Norman's in Belgium. . . ."

"I'm leaving first thing in the morning. . . . Never mind! I wouldn't have suggested it if I'd thought you would object. Good-night, Margery. If you don't hurry up, my mother will have gone up to dress. . . . And, once again, I'm sorry to have offended you."

"You haven't. But you will, if you're not careful," she warned him. "I ask you, as a *favour*, Freddie, to walk back to the house; I shan't be with your mother more than a minute; and then . . ."—she summoned her courage and satisfied herself of its quality—" . . . then you can walk back with me as far as the gate. I ask as a favour."

"If you make a favour of it . . . *I've* said 'no' once, but I'm not quite so inflexible. . . . Thank you, Margie dear; it's a favour to *me*," he added more graciously. "Perhaps, later on, *you* won't be so inflexible."

"We'll see."

Though she reached the house too late to spend more than five minutes with Lady Melby, Margery wondered whether she had ever known time to pass so slowly. Trivial questions, tranquilly projected to her in a tone as rich and comfortable as the glowing hall in which they were sitting, rasped her ears like a false note of music; in every syllable her hearing was strained for the voice of Freddie, commanding, pleading or, more subtly, biding its time before choosing between command and plea. She could see his motionless, watching outline in the leaping shadows of the background. Talking to Lady Melby was like playing bowls under the menace of a spiritual Armada; and, as Margery spoke mechanically of Norman's work in Belgium or lowered her voice in asking after Mr. Britton, she was on fire for the contest to which Freddie was urging her.

Until she had beaten him, she would never feel secure.

"If you're all by yourself, why don't you dine with us?" Lady Melby proposed. "It's the easiest thing in the world to send a telephone message; and Freddie would drive you home afterwards."

The concrete question rang out like a bell to clear the ring. If she dined at Melby, her encounter would only be postponed.

"Thanks, I don't think I'd better," she answered. "My nurse always gets so nervous if I change my plans. Another night, if you'll let me. . . . Goodness! It's half-past seven!"

As she stood up, Freddie separated himself from his black-and-orange background of shadow and flame.

"May I walk with you?" he asked.

"Do!" Margery answered graciously, though she was surrendering an outwork in aiding his pretence that they had not already arranged to walk home together.

"And you'll let me know when you can come over and see little Judith? . . ." she heard.

Then Freddie helped her into a coat, and she hurried, eager for battle, into the stinging darkness of an October night.

5

In the moment left her for taking up a new position, Margery bounded for safety to a summit of impersonal triviality.

"I've not seen Judith for one, two, nearly *three* months! I suppose she's grown out of all recognition. It's an extraordinary thing: you'd say I had time and to spare down here; my little daily jobs don't take me more than the morning. In spite of that, if I try to make time to see your mother, for instance . . ."

"Margie, what's happened?"

The deep, assured voice, no less than the masterful impingement of a will unflurried and unimpressed by her irrelevancies, dragged her down from her heights.

"What d'you mean? Nothing, so far as I know," she answered breathlessly.

"Is nothing changed?"

"I don't understand you, Freddie!"

"No? Then you have indeed changed! It was just your understanding that made you different from every woman in the world. It can't be anything *I've* done: we've not met since the days when we lived in *quite* another atmosphere. . . . Ever since, I've been thinking of that life we lived apart; I came down here to-day like a man dashing south for an hour of sunshine." . . .

"And you've found everything as it was before," she broke in with assurance. "We're great friends—at least, I hope we

are— ; and I always enjoy being with you. But, though you may think me an absolute prude, we can't quite forget the world all round us. You're married ; I'm married. There's no reason under the sun why you shouldn't come back to Newbridge to-night, but I don't choose to have people saying that you and I are always dining together, alone, when Norman and Gloria are away."

The speech, hurriedly rehearsed as she fumbled with Lady Melby's conversation, was incredibly hard to deliver ; and Margery hurried ahead as though she had flung a grenade and was running from the explosion.

"Always ? Once !" The new bitterness in Freddie's usually tranquil voice had all the force of an explosion. "Good Heavens, when all four of us are here we're in and out of each other's houses all day long ! I *asked* you if Norman could possibly object ! That won't do, Margery. If you say I mustn't come, it means you don't want me. . . . And I've been thinking of you night and day. I was vain enough to fancy you might be missing me. . . . Were you ? " he demanded abruptly, as she walked steadily on without answering.

"I've hardly had time to miss any one. As you know, for months after I had my baby, I never went anywhere ; the result is that I've had a perfect host of things to do, calls to pay. . . ."

"You haven't answered my question," he interrupted.

"I've told you : I haven't had time to think of *anything*."

"Well, that clears the air, . . . if it's true."

"Of course it's true !" As the rudeness of his words struck home, Margery stopped short. "Freddie, I shall have to ask you to let me go the rest of the way by myself. There's something the matter with you to-night. I've borne it as long as I can, though you're in a horrible temper for some reason ; but I can't allow you to insult me. 'If it's true,' indeed !"

As he, too, had stopped, she took a step forward.

"Well, is it ?"

His hand fell suddenly on her shoulder and sent a shiver down her spine. Too late, Margery recollected that she had determined not to let him touch her, but his other hand on her other shoulder turned her until she was facing him ; and her old giddiness returned, mingling with the old pain which she could never locate. In the light of the rising moon, she saw him bending down to scrutinize her expression. Her mouth and cheeks were muffled in the high fur-collar of her coat ; a low hat shielded her forehead and shaded her eyes ; but, as she winced at his grip, she knew that even in the half-light she shewed herself fascinated.

"I *wish* you wouldn't do that! You *frightened* me!" she cried in the petulance of fear.

"*Haven't* you missed me, Margie?"

"Oh, I suppose I have . . . a certain amount."

"Aren't you glad I've come back? To-night, when we met on this spot and you went white as death . . ."

"I was startled!"

"And pleased?"

"I . . . I thought you were in London."

"No more than that? Margie!"

Sliding his hands down her arms, he caught her fingers and drew her forward until her chin, up-turned, brushed the peat-scented tweed of his coat. Her eyes stared blindly into his, and her yielding body was crushed against him. By a sense other than sight she knew that his face was drawing near; as her eyelids drooped, they were sealed by a kiss; and, as her arms fell to her sides, she was caught up and held to his heart.

"You mustn't! Freddie, *really* you mustn't!" she whimpered in spiritless protest.

"I've waited so long! I've come so far! You darling child!"

As her feet touched the ground, her knees bent beneath her; an arm stole under hers and supported her through the tree-roofed tunnel to the dividing gate; inertly she watched his disengaged hand feeling for the catch; and, at the moment when her will seemed dead, he set her free and stood apart:

"You said I might come as far as this. Must I say good-bye? It's a question of hours before I go back to London. And I think you *have* missed me a little."

"I suppose I have."

"May I come with you?"

"I suppose you may," she answered dully.

His arm took possession of her again as they walked down the uneven slope. Below them the massive square of Newbridge stood out white and impregnable against a far-stretching background of grass that was grey in the moonlight; the broad black waters of the moat roughened in the wind to silver wrinkles; but for once both house and moat had lost their power of protection. As a thin light wavered from the windows in a yellow mist at their feet, Freddie again set her free as though he were challenging her to dismiss him:

"May I come in with you?"

"I suppose so."

"Are you going to ask me to dinner?"

"I suppose so. . . . I'll tell Manners."

"I shall see whether you've been keeping your piano in good order."

6

When she came into the drawing-room, Margery found him playing by the light of the fire and of a single lamp. His eyes grew bright in a smile of welcome ; but there was no answering smile as she leaned on the piano and watched him.

"My child, don't look so serious !" he laughed.

"You oughtn't to have made me ask you."

"I can't *make* you do *anything* you don't want to." She remained silent and unconvinced. "Would you like me to go ?"

"Oh, you're here now. I've told Manners. The harm's done."

"But, darling Margie, what harm *is* there ? If we enjoy meeting like this, who's injured ? You're not giving me something that you withhold from Norman ; I'm withholding nothing from Gloria ; but you surely wouldn't say that we must have no kind of life apart from them." His voice and the gentle accompaniment of the music made her drowsy as on the summer night when she sat with him alone in the garden of Melby. "So many parts are needed to make up the whole of life. . . . The design of Michael Angelo, the might of Velasquez, the colour of Titian : they mean nothing to Gloria ; and, when I feel a need for pictures in my life, I take them into my life in company with a funny little old man to whom pictures mean everything that great music means to me. . . . But poetry ! My dear Gloria can make herself drunk on poetry that to me is simply a neatly turned phrase, a thought like a prisoned rainbow, . . . beautiful, but not inspiring. I read poetry because I have to ; I must recognize it when it's quoted, or people will think me illiterate ; but I can't appreciate it, however much I try ; and, in poetry, Gloria has a life apart. . . . Norman's often told me that music, to him, is simply a noise ; he can't enter into that part of your life. And I always wondered whether you could enter into his feeling for the past. I can't. History, the magic of tradition : that's a sense lacking in me. . . . And these are only the aesthetic sides of life. . . . I could talk of God with Gloria, but not with you ; and I could talk with you of things that she wouldn't understand. That's what I mean by a life apart, Margie ; it's something we need, but something that carries nothing over into your life with Norman or mine with Gloria. Otherwise I couldn't be here. *You* understand that, *don't* you ?"

"If that were all, I shouldn't feel it was wrong."

Freddie smiled into the troubled face above him:

"My child, how *can* it be wrong?"

"It's wrong for us to kiss," Margery answered stubbornly. "I know people do. I don't think it matters in the ordinary way, but it *does* matter when we do it secretly. If Norman . . . or Gloria . . ."

"But the whole of our life is in secret, little Margie. I once told you . . . in this room . . . at this piano . . . that I'd give up coming to see you, if you insisted, but that I couldn't tell Gloria because she wouldn't understand. That's still true. If any part is wrong, the whole is wrong; if the whole is wrong, every part is wrong. I say the whole is *not* wrong; you know it's not wrong, Margie. A kiss . . . ? It's a very intimate, very beautiful thing. . . . And you feel there's no room in your life for such an intimacy with me? Is that it? But, dear child, you're rejecting the symbol and admitting the reality! Our real intimacy is a thing of the spirit, a thing born of a wonderful sympathy, an affinity of soul that we share with no one else. Can *that* be wrong? . . ." His hands dropped away from the keys, and he stood up smiling. "Kiss me, darling," he whispered, "and tell me how it can be wrong."

As he approached her, she drew herself upright and stood rooted to the floor:

"Freddie, don't make me!"

"I can't make you if you don't want to; and, if it were wrong, I shouldn't try. Margie, there was a moment when you discovered for the first time that we had a world of understanding cut off from our other lives; you kissed me then without being asked. Why will you try to confuse the few moments that we spend together with the day-to-day life that you live with Norman? This is an hour apart, to be remembered when we meet again and forgotten when we're away. . . . *Margie!*"

As though she were drawn by physical force, she found herself forsaking the support of the piano and moving slowly towards him. With the weariness of uttermost exhaustion, she laid her hands on his shoulders and stood on tip-toe to reach his lips. As she gave proof of her surrender, a sob broke from her, and she hid her face on his breast:

"W-why did you make me? It's wrong, wrong!"

"My child, you don't want to spoil our one hour together? Don't think of other things, other people! We're by ourselves in a world of our own. Rest your head against me," as you did on that first night in the garden, when I picked you up and carried

you home. Curl yourself in my arms, little Margie. Don't cry, or I shall think you're unhappy. You're not unhappy?"

"I . . . don't know."

"Say you're not unhappy!" he whispered, as he gathered her in his arms and carried her to a chair.

"I . . . suppose not."

"You must be quite sure. If you're unhappy, I'll go; if you want me, I'll stay. I won't go back to London to-morrow. Which is it to be?"

In the motionless, deep silence he could feel the thumping of her heart.

"I . . . don't want you to go," she answered with a last dry sob.

With drugged senses and paralysed brain, she cowered in the protection of his arms until a distant footfall in the flagged hall roused her. When dinner was announced, she was sitting on the music-stool with her face turned from the light; rising nonchalantly, she led the way to the door, still too nearly hypnotized to care whether her movements or speech were unusual. Freddie's voice kept her company across the hall; she saw him sitting down opposite her and heard his voice again, once more talking against time for the benefit of the servants. For the brief intervals in which they were left alone, his voice and manner changed to a more beguiling intimacy, but at all times throughout dinner Margery was concerned only to have ready some reply that was not too conspicuously irrelevant. A greater effort, rousing her brain from the sleep to which his will had drugged her, might have set her thinking, regretting, striving to retrieve a battle that was already lost. For an hour she had been trying to remember a single word, an expression of resignation, a foreign word out of the east; something that implied a force too strong to be withstood. Kismet. . . .

As it flamed across her mind, she made a last resistance:

"I'm so tired, Freddie. I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to excuse me."

"You don't want me to go, Margie," he answered.

As he came round to her chair, she noticed that he had ceased to throw his orders into the form of a question.

CHAPTER TWO

SAINT GERMAYNE'S WELL

How many a thing which we cast to the ground,
When others pick it up becomes a gem !
We grasp at all the wealth it is to them ;
And by reflected light its worth is found.
Yet for us still 't is nothing ! . . .

—GEORGE MEREDITH : *Modern Love*.

I

MARGERY awoke next day in a mood of reckless relief.

The long excitement of suspense had been ended for her ; and she could enjoy the resignation of the gambler who sees his last coin raked away from him, of the fugitive from justice who reads the warrant for his arrest. Whatever terrors the future might hold, she no longer feared nor fought with the shade that had descended, night and day, on Newbridge, by way of Poplar Ridge, from Melby Court.

Freddie had promised to call for her at eleven. Promised or threatened : Margery could not decide on the word. And, as her brain repeated the half-heard caress of his whisper overnight, she obediently tried to believe that they had in truth created some secret world into which they could step aside. It was possible to believe anything while she was hypnotized ; but her daily life was being forced upon her by the maid who brought her tea, then letters, then the daily papers. The world of yesterday was still revolving.

Slipping on a dressing-gown, Margery paid her day's first visit to the night-nursery.

" Good-morning, nurse. Good-morning, my little Norman Edgar ! " she exclaimed, surprised the while to find herself so good an actress.

Her round-cheeked baby was solidly real. Overnight, she

remembered deliberately forgetting him, as she forgot deliberately the father from whose loins he was sprung. Now, she recognized, she had confronted herself with him in the hope of finding how much Freddie, with his talk of their one hour apart, had left her.

"Sir Norman's sent him another postcard, my lady," said the nurse.

"You spoilt child!" Margery laughed, as she coaxed a dog's-eared card from her son's prehensile fingers.

Her title was still so unfamiliar that, whenever a servant used it, she was abashed by her own youth. Behind her back, she well knew, she was always called "Miss Margery".

Norman's handwriting, glimpsed through the chubby fingers of Norman's son, cleared her mind of the mist which Freddie's rhetoric had spread.

"I've been . . . unfaithful," she told herself. "We're only just married, we've a child; Norman's done everything in the world for me, I love him, I *don't* love Freddie. . . . If he ever *imagined* . . ."

Less than eighteen months before, her father had asked what a child of her age could know about love; her mother had explained what marriage signified for a woman. What would they think of somebody who, at one-and-twenty, was frankly vicious as any of the hard, bitter women who with a thousand times more justification found their way into the divorce court?

What would Roy think? It was only since her marriage that she realized his delicacy in protecting her from the ugly sights and sounds of life. In speech and in thought she had been, to him, the incarnation of purity. It was the novelty of her innocence that excited Freddie's interest.

"If I'd been like every one else, he'd never have given me a thought. . . . I *am* like every one else now." . . .

Breakfasting by herself opposite Norman's empty chair, Margery wondered whether she would tell him and then walk out of the house or run away first and tell him from a distance. The child must remain behind: that was the least she could do. There must be some place in the world where she could hide from her parents, though it was unlikely that any one would want to follow her. . . .

The sound of a horn at the gate-house set her speculating idly how Freddie would approach her; and how was she to receive a man for whom she felt only indifference? A moment later, he came into the library, with a cap in his hand. The sun, striking on to his face, made him screw up his eyes till their

expression was hidden ; but she observed that his manner was self-possessed.

"I drove myself over and I want to know whether you'll come out with me. It's a perfect morning, and we shan't have many more days like this before the winter's upon us. How are you, Margie ? "

"I'm all right, thanks. I thought you were going back to London."

"No, I wired to say there was so much to do that I'd stay on for a few days. They'll be very few, though."

"I can't come this morning."

"Well, will you come this afternoon ? "

"No. . . . Freddie, it's time we had this out. I've been trying to make excuses for myself, wondering how I can ever hold my head up again or ask God to forgive me. . . . I was mad, but *that's* not an excuse. I can't see things clearly yet, the world seems to be standing on its head . . . No, don't touch me ! " she cried, as his hand stretched out to take hers.

"Poor little Margie ! " murmured Freddie. " Indeed the world's still going round in the old way, with more than all its old beauty. It *is* a beautiful world, Margie ; or, rather, it's an ugly world made beautiful by love ; and you have made it more beautiful for me than I ever thought possible. That's the only change ! "

Margery shook her head vigorously and turned away as she felt her eyes growing misty with tears :

"No ! You've killed something ! "

"And I thought I'd only seen a new love coming to birth," he whispered.

"But I don't love you ! I never did, I never shall ! I love Norman, and you've made me betray him. He believed in me, he could trust me. That's what we've killed."

"If I thought that . . ." He paused as her head drooped forward ; a sob shook her, and his hand slipped protectively round her shoulders. " If I thought that, I'd tie a stone round my neck and throw myself into the moat. But it isn't so, my poor child ! I told you that we had a life apart, where no one could break in." . . .

"It's just *words* ! " Margery cried.

"But when Norman comes back . . ." Freddie began.

"There'll be something dead ! "

"Not your love for him. Not his love for you. Everything will be as it was before." . . . His soothing voice was beginning to numb her brain, as the touch of his hand paralysed her

resistance. "No one will ever know the mystery of our secret life, sweetheart. It needs a new language. . . . My poor troubled child, I'm going to take you into the sunshine ; and I shan't let you go till I see you smiling again. No one has been harmed ; it's our secret life that affects no one else, we've brought new love into the world, that's all."

As she walked by his side to the car, Margery cared only that she had allowed him to stop her arguing against herself. His personality took away even the desire to resist, though she had forgotten the quality of his voice and the colour of his eyes. Once and only once, when the biting air of an autumn morning cleared her head, she roused herself to challenge him :

"I wonder what you'd think if Gloria behaved like this ? Would *that* make no difference when she came back to you ? "

"Gloria. . . . Now let me see if I can make this clear to you," Freddie began very earnestly. "I don't think she's capable of what I've called a life apart. Now, I *need* it. Perhaps it's because I'm so much older than she is. There's a room in my life, which she doesn't fill, which nobody filled until I met you. . . . I wonder if you understand what I mean."

Staring ahead through a film of tears, Margery made no answer. She could only have said : "Words, words, words ! " ; but, if once she admitted that she saw through the fustian of Freddie's rhetoric, she would be thrown back defenceless to the mood of despair which he had coaxed her to forget.

"You've stolen something that belongs to Norman," she broke out, as the drug of his consolation began to lose its grip on her.

"We've created something that put a seal on our love without taking anything from him. You're still his wife, Margie ; he's still your husband ; your life lies with him ; and this . . . this is a Saint Martin's summer. . . . Such a short summer," he added with a sigh. "A day . . . an hour . . . and I shall have to leave you. Aren't you glad I came back ? "

"Ah, don't worry me ! " she cried with a choking sob. "I want to be left in peace, I don't want to think."

They lunched in a distant country inn and returned to Newbridge in the dusk. Next day, with a new-born proficiency in subterfuge, Margery had all her meals at home and met him clandestinely in Melby woods ; the day after, with due warning, she dined at Melby and discovered a further new proficiency in acting for the benefit of Lady Melby. Since the first day she had continued to make her mind blank of all other thoughts when she was with Freddie and blank of him when he was away from her. As she went mechanically about her day's duties, even as she

wrote to her mother and Norman, she felt that in due time she would wake from her dream and that, while she dreamed, she was not responsible for her actions. Once, in a waking moment, she asked herself whether she was happy and answered herself that she was void of emotion.

On the last day of the week Freddie reminded her that he was returning to London.

"I don't know when we shall meet again . . . like this," he murmured.

"We shan't," Margery answered dully.

"Are you tired of your Saint Martin's summer?"

She jumped up restlessly and left his side. Some change had overtaken one or other of them, and she felt free of his domination. Perhaps he was no longer trying to retain her; she was too indifferent to care. Irritating always with his monotonously caressing voice, he had suddenly become unbearable.

"I must say good-bye now," she told him hurriedly. "It's time for me to dress . . ."

"Aren't you asking me to stay?"

This time at least there was no urgency in his plea.

"No, I'm . . . What's happened? I can't see!"

Before he could reach her, Margery had fallen in a heap on the floor. Already one temple was swelling to a bruise where she had knocked her head against the door; she was insensible and lay motionless on the sofa where he laid her until the doctor arrived. Mrs. May-Kingston, summoned by telegram, reached Newbridge that night to receive a report of severe concussion. Next morning, though there seemed no danger of immediate death, the doctor advised that Norman should be recalled from Belgium.

2

A telegram from Brussels announced that he was crossing that day by air; and, on reaching the aerodrome, Norman found a strange car waiting for him at the door of the customs-shed.

"I knew you'd like the latest bulletin," Freddie began. "She's alive; and, with great respect, I think it was quite unnecessary to send for you. . . . I don't suppose you've had any food, have you? I've some sandwiches and a flask in the car. Come along!"

As he allowed himself to be led and pushed into the car, Norman could only murmur:

"Awfully good of you. . . . Let's hear what happened."

Before answering, Freddie unpacked a parcel of food and spread it on Norman's knees :

" You start in on this. And tell me when you'd like a drink. . . . Well, she had a fall ; there was slight concussion ; and, of course, it's a great shock. But that's *all*. She has youth and everything else in her favour." . . .

" Does any one know how it took place ? "

" Yes, I was there at the time. . . . To begin at the beginning, you remember that Gloria and I came up to London with you—the admiral's dying, by the way ; cirrhosis of the liver, as you'd expect— ; well, I had to go back to Melby for a few days on business ; as Margery was all by herself, I got her to come over and dine with my mother and I dined with her once. The day before I was due back, I looked in to see if she had any commissions for me in London, and it was then that she was taken ill."

" Did she give you any warning ? "

" Well, to be wise after the event, I suppose she did. *You* know better than any one what an extraordinarily sweet-tempered girl she is. I thought, that afternoon, she was rather on edge : if she'd been a child, poor girl, you'd have said she was fractious. There was no *other* sign until she said it was time for her to go up and dress. Then she called out : ' What's the matter ? I'm so giddy ' or something of the kind. Then there was a bump. I should think it was an honest, straight-forward faint, and she had the ill-luck not to fall clear. I sent for a doctor and wired for her mother. . . . By the way, you'll be glad to hear she's unmarked ; the skin wasn't even broken."

Norman drew a deep breath ; then, without turning, he groped for Freddie's hand :

" It's . . . it's good of you to do all this."

" My dear fellow, I've done nothing ! I had the luck to be on the spot at the time. . . . You'll go straight down there to-night, I suppose ? I told my man to go to Paddington. I'd come down with you, Norman, if I could ; but I don't like to leave Gloria with the old man in his present state."

" Oh, of course not ! I can get on all right, thanks."

" If I may offer a word of advice, I shouldn't bother Margery with too many questions," Freddie recommended. " She remembers nothing of the accident . . . or of anything that happened for some time before ; and you can see it's an effort for her when she tries to remember."

At Gloucester Norman was met by Mrs. May-Kingston, whose advice was even more emphatic :

"Her nerves have quite broken down, and I can hardly make the doctor believe that, until this happened, Margery hadn't a nerve in her body. He feels that the accident by itself is not enough to explain the collapse. I'm not saying this to frighten you; but you mustn't be impatient."

By the time that the doctor, at the end of his evening visit, had uttered yet another warning, Norman was prepared to find his wife temporarily delirious if not permanently insane. His heart bounded with relief when she recognized him. Though her head was bandaged, she had lost neither flesh nor colour; only her eyes, shadow-ringed and dark with dilated pupils, were restless and timid. Warned not to excite her by talking, he sat down and took her hands in silence; but his presence or touch was more potent than the head-shaking of the nurse.

"My darling, you've come back? I thought I should never see you again!" Margery whispered. "Norman, how long is it since you went away? I've lost count of time, haven't I, nurse? And I can't remember. You understand that, don't you? I can't remember. The doctor says it happens ever so often with concussion. And I've been thinking how funny it is! You might do all sorts of things; but, if you've *forgotten*, you'd say you hadn't done them. If you killed a man and then had concussion and forgot about it . . ."

"Darling, I don't think I should bother my head about that kind of thing, if I were you," Norman interrupted gently. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm all right! And I'm so *glad* to have you back! Norman darling, promise me you won't go away again! I can't bear you to leave me. You're going to stay with me now, aren't you? Promise, Norman! And don't you think—it's such a big room, I feel so lonely—, don't you think you might have a bed moved in here?"

In the shadows behind Margery's head the nurse appeared suddenly and attracted Norman's attention with a nod.

"Yes, of course I will," he answered. "We'll have that rigged up in no time. . . . But I expect I shall only be allowed in here on condition that I don't let you talk."

"Oh, but I *want* to talk . . . now that I've got you back. You've been to see Norman Edgar? Oh, but you *must*, he's such a darling! You couldn't bear to leave him; you won't leave me again, *will* you? When I thought you weren't coming back . . ."

"But you always knew I was coming back, Margie! It would only have been another week at most. Now that I'm here,

I shall stay here, of course. I wired to your father, and he sent another man to take over from me. I won't leave you till you send me away. There! Is that good enough for you?"

"Thank God you've come!" Margery whispered. Then her heavy lids drooped over the restless eyes, and her voice became drowsy. "Norman, when I'm well again, will you take me right away? Take me back to Spain! We were so happy there! All the old places. . . . We can start again from the beginning. . . . I want to forget. . . . the accident, I mean. I have forgotten, but I want to forget the forgetting. . . . forget. . . . I don't know. . . . forget. . . ."

A fortnight passed before the doctor would declare Margery fit to travel. In that time Andrew May-Kingston swept down on Newbridge like an invigorating breeze of sanity and strength; old Lady Melby motored over once or twice a week with enquiries and presents of books or flowers; and, two days before their departure, Gloria wrote to announce her father's death.

"You must not imagine that I haven't been thinking of you," she began. "I was terribly distressed to hear of your accident and most thankful to learn from Freddie that, however unpleasant for you and Norman, it is not really serious. I have been kept busy night and day with my poor father. You have probably seen that he died on Sunday night—quite peacefully, I rejoice to say; the funeral took place yesterday, and this is the first spare moment I have had. My mother-in-law tells me that Norman is taking you abroad immediately: how wise of you both! We are returning to Melby to-morrow and shall of course hope to see you before you set out on your travels. I wish I were coming with you!" . . .

The letter reached Margery while she was still in bed; and, after reading it, she lay silent, watching her maid at work on a half-filled cabin-trunk. When Norman came in, she smiled a greeting; but it was only when they were alone together that she gave him the letter to read.

"I hope we can bring off a meeting," was his comment, as he handed it back to her. "I never remember being more touched than when Freddie took the trouble to come and meet me after I'd flown over. . . ."

"I should have thought it was the least he could do," Margery interrupted.

"Not one man in a hundred would have thought of it; we weren't such friends as all that. There you get the unknown quantity in Freddie: when you think you've analysed and

classified him, he does the one thing that you least expect. As you know, I don't care for him particularly ; I don't think you do, either . . ."

"I always recognized his good points." Margery felt her brain coming to a standstill as she groped blindly for any conversational relief. "I remember, just before my accident, he was motoring me into Gloucester when a brute of a man drove right over a dog and went on without stopping, though the old woman it belonged to rushed out of her cottage and called out to him. Freddie jumped out and comforted the poor old thing, who was quite dazed ; then he gave her money to buy another dog and insisted on digging a grave for her old beastie because he knew how upset she'd be if she had to do it herself."

"He's like that : full of contradictions," said Norman shortly. "Well, what are you going to do about Gloria's letter ? She evidently wants to see you." . . .

"I *think* I must leave it until we come back," Margery answered quickly.

"Then, my dear, we won't ask them."

On the arrival of the doctor for his final visit, Norman went downstairs ; but he was waiting in the hall half-an-hour later and led the way into the library for a moment's private conversation :

"There may be nothing in this ; but, some time shortly before the accident, my wife had the unpleasantness of seeing a dog run over by the car ahead of her. She's always been mad about animals ; and it's left an ugly, rankling impression on her mind, though I don't gather that there was any smash or any danger of a smash for her. Of course, it may have frightened her—subconsciously—more than she knew. I didn't dare ask any questions, because I was pretending not to notice anything. She threw the thing out casually, as an anecdote ; but she used the words 'just before my accident', and the important thing is that her memory of that time must be coming back."

"That is very interesting," said the doctor expressionlessly. "I'm glad you told me."

"I hope it means that the blow wasn't as bad as I feared."

"But I told you from the first that there was nothing alarming in that. It was the general shock."

"Well, she's made great progress, doctor, thanks to you. And I hope that by the time I bring her back from Spain she'll be as fit as she ever was."

"I'm sure I hope so too. Meanwhile, it's *imperative* that you should do nothing to hurry on this rebirth of memory. It

won't do a ha'porth of good to anybody if it *does* all come back ; perhaps it will, perhaps it won't ; but, if you try—let me say—to force the growth, I . . . won't be responsible . . . for the consequences."

Norman nodded gravely and drove with the doctor as far as Melby Court. Gloria was by herself, immersed in *A Gloucestershire Holiday* ; and, for the first time in many months, he felt shy at being alone with her. What *did* she hope to win from life ? Success, as she had boasted so long ago at the cottage-hospital fête ? The admiral was out of the way at last ; but she had lost ground with their neighbours, when Prince William rebuffed her, and with Freddie, when she ran away . . . and then came back. . . .

" I'm afraid Margery's not up to seeing any one at present," he told her. " When we come back . . . "

" It must have been more serious than I thought," answered Gloria sympathetically.

" Her nerves have gone to pieces. I blame myself for that entirely. I had no business to leave her alone so much. However, it's not too late to make a fresh start." . . .

After a word of condolence on the admiral's death, Norman took his leave.

" As I wrote to Margery, I wish I were coming with you," said Gloria. " A fresh start. It's *not* too late," she told herself, as she went back to *A Gloucestershire Holiday*.

3

" *In the high woodland between Newbridge Park and Melby Court,*" she read, "*lies an overgrown pool fed by a surface spring. Though there is no visible outlet for the water, the pool has never been known to overflow its banks ; and, when every other pond in the neighbourhood has sunk to a mess of steaming mud, 'Jummin's Pool' has always at least enough water to cover the tangled roots, the rotting leaves and the occasional body of animal or bird that lie beneath its veil of coloured scum.* . . .

" *To the stranger there is something almost miraculous in the steady trickle of cool water on the hottest day of the longest drought ; to the natives, who approach the pool reverently at definite times for a definite purpose, the origin and continuity of the water are as miraculous as its properties. A nameless woman of untraced antiquity is said to have been found wandering alone in the woods and weeping because she had been married ten years and had borne*

her husband no child. An old man, passing by, listened to her tale and, praying in an unknown tongue, struck the ground with his staff; when water gushed from the dry earth, he scooped it up in his hands and baptized the woman with the sign of the cross. Within a year she bore her husband a son and continued to bear him sons until her time was past. . . .

"A more pagan tradition relates that an old man of hideous aspect craved water of a woman and that she led him to a spring known to herself alone; as he drank, the man shed his deformities and commanded the woman to ask of him whatsoever she desired. Her only wish, as in the first story, was for a child; and this was granted to her. . . .

"Both accounts, for all their difference of spirit, agree upon the place in which the spring was found or evoked; as postscript and proof, both add that in the memory of uncounted generations the water has never failed; the saint, the magician and the woman are alike in having been commemorated for perhaps fifteen hundred years without the assistance of a name; but the secluded pond, hidden far from bridle-path or fox's track, has been unchangingly known, to the despair of antiquarians, as 'Jummin's Pool'. . . .

The Kendailes were first initiated into the mysteries of this part of their property when John Kendaile, with a city-bred business-man's hatred of the slip-shod, tried to fence the Melby woods against the lawless perambulation of his humbler neighbours. Their trespassing, so far as he could discover, was inspired by love of illegality for its own sake, for not even the most truculent of many vagrants haled to justice by efficient, new keepers tried to maintain that there was a right of way; and, in the hope of ingratiating himself, John Kendaile had taken trouble about his preserving.

When his own servants were tied to trees with his own barbed wire, the proprietor conducted a personal investigation and discovered that he had been trying to close at least a spiritual right of way to a form of devotion little later than the arrival of Hengist and Horsa. Infected by the debilitating fever of amateur antiquarianism, Freddie tested his more enlightened visitors with the theory that Jummin was almost certainly a corruption of Germaine, though his fever left him before he had determined whether the patron saint of children restricted his miraculous power to healing their diseased bodies when they were born or gave it more ambitious play by getting them born in despite of their parents' obstinate sterility.

The legend of the pool had been almost forgotten at Melby

when Gloria was introduced to the overgrown trickle of rusty water. Freddie's effort to amuse her with a picturesque superstition belonged to the numbing days of their engagement, when she walked about repeating : " I don't care who I marry. . . . I don't care what I do. . . . I'm *not* in love with you ; I never shall be . . . " For her, nevertheless, Jummin's Pool remained a private sanctuary ; and, as her second confinement drew near, she threaded her way more and more often along the track which the feet of the faithful had worn smooth for fifteen centuries. In pagan times, a visit to the pool had been part of the marriage ceremony ; Christianity dubbed the magic water holy and stipulated for a preliminary confession of sins ; and mysticism, which was Gloria's name for a feeling too insubstantial to be analysed, found comfort in the thought that the shrine retained in the whispering of its leaves the myriad prayers of a myriad yearning women. Though death took the body, might not their souls linger to strengthen her supplication ?

" If I bear Freddie a son," she whispered, " we *might* make a fresh start." . . .

Though she would never admit defeat, it was time to make a demonstration of solidarity. Already Dot St. John was telling all her friends that the marriage was a failure ; Bella Dixon, inviting her to Abergeldy, dared to write : "*Shall I ask Freddie too, or would that be tactless ?*" And, until she answered his prayers, he would continue silently to contrast her with Margery Cartwright and his own sisters-in-law, as a woman who had still to learn her business in life. . . .

On the day after Norman's call, Gloria set out for her shrine. Old Lady Melby was resting ; Freddie was in Birmingham ; and she was resolved that this visit should be in some way different from the others. So tightly interlocked were faith and scepticism that she carried a cushion to protect her knees from the sodden earth ; in mingled levity and awe she took up her position opposite the dripping, moss-green boulder down whose face the miraculous spring bubbled with a stain of rusty brown. Half expecting an immediate supernatural manifestation, half hoping that she would tire of her prank, she waited long for the vacant ecstasy of her first communion. If any one saw her ! . . . A spirit of mockery demanded why she was there ; and she could only answer that she was come, like any bucolic peasant-woman from the village, to pray God or the older gods for a son.

" A son. . . . A son." . . .

By whispering the words again and again she closed the windows of her mind to everything but the murmuring trickle of

water, the startling splash of a leaping frog behind her, the mustiness of primordial moisture and the pleading whisper of her own voice :

"A son. . . . A son." . . .

It was not enough to repeat the words : like the peasant women who murmured to the mossy boulder and crossed their breasts with the rusty water, she had to make confession. Her childhood left little cause for regret : if she had fought single-heartedly for her own hand, she had been taught to fight thus by her father's philosophy. Thereafter life became more complicated ; but, if she were before the Judgement Seat, there was very little that she could not justify. Norman. . . . She had loved him so much that she had never been able to love any one else, which was her answer to Freddie and to her conscience. Nevertheless, if Norman had been a penniless vagrant like her own father, she would never have contemplated marrying him. By ill-luck, she had fallen in love without realizing that she could never be his wife. To lose Freddie for the chance of marrying Norman five years later was not sacrifice but suicide.

After so long an interval she could look back even on the day when she yielded to Freddie. The daughter of such a father and mother was not as other women : her breed was passionate ; and only a girl who had successfully resisted the deadly, unceasing attack of such a suitor was entitled to sit in judgement. That she had married him for money and position was not a sin ; she had consented, after frank warning, to marry him against her will ; and for nearly two years she had striven to make the best of a life which many would have called hopeless.

The admiral ? . . . If she had committed every crime in the calendar, he had his revenge when he raved against her in his last delirium. But had he any ground for complaint if she followed his teaching ? London was worth a mass ; and, when she set out to conquer, she had to break with the old friends and the old habits of her shifty youth. Bella Dixon and the second-rate, boisterous rich could not be driven in double harness with Sir Hilary Thorpe and the ' old Gloucestershire worthies ' ; Dot St. John and the celebrity-hunters had to be dropped until the day when Freddie returned to them as a celebrity in his own right.

Norman ?

Gloria fancied that she had disposed of Norman ; but a word remained to be added if she was to escape the charge of sacrificing him for an unworthy ambition. She had never striven for a higher place than she deserved by nature. From the first

Freddie had promised her a better position at Melby than she would ever have known at Newbridge ; from the first she had refused to admit that there could be any competition between the two houses. Norman had, indeed, attempted it, when, for all his pretence of a broken heart, he fell in love with the first pink-and-white doll he saw and married an heiress with money enough to outbid every effort that Melby could make. Gloria had declined the challenge ; and any rivalry came from the Cartwrights, who left her to slave single-handed for the war-memorial and then stepped in to take all the credit. It was not for themselves, it was not their fault, as they had been so careful to tell Freddie : Prince William had " assumed " that he was going to Newbridge, as every one conspired to assume that the Cartwrights were entitled to a place aloof and apart. . . .

When two women both wanted sons equally, God Himself joined the conspiracy to secure the Cartwright line. . . .

" A son. . . . A son." . . .

As wife of one Lord Melby and mother of a second, Gloria could raise her head again, above Freddie, above the Cartwrights ; her due place was assured to her. Already her husband was using his wasted talents in making a reputation for himself as an authority on finance : against his will, he had been goaded into attending the House of Lords ; and the lazy old men were telling her that he had a political future if she would supply the necessary ambition. . . .

With sunset came a penetrating cold that made Gloria shiver. She had crouched without moving for two hours ; her body was stiff, her fingers blue and her mind filled with a sudden distaste for barbaric superstitions. Her child would be a boy because she had resolved that it should be a boy.

Forsaking the direct path, she tramped through the crackling undergrowth to the gate from which, once before, she had looked down on the lights of Newbridge. As on the night when she chose between Freddie and Norman, Melby Court was hidden by trees ; but she could see the lights twinkling between the leafless boughs. The opposing gleam, the opposing proximity of the two houses seemed to symbolize an opposition in life, though she took no part in it. As Freddie and Norman had contended for her, so Norman and Margery seemed to be contesting with Freddie her right to exist in the same quarter of England. Gloria let her eyes wander far away from either house to the deep cut of the Severn and the winking lights beyond. As, four hundred years ago, the new bridge-house had commanded the countryside, so—it was felt by some—the Cartwrights in every generation

would continue to command ; to others the landscape was a disputed territory and a prize for the best man.

" *I've* never said there's not room for us both," she whispered.

4

On reaching home, Gloria walked wearily upstairs to change her wet shoes. Forgetting that she was usually out of the house at this time of the afternoon, she was surprised to see the door of her bedroom open and a shadow darting with grotesque leaps and sidlings along the wall and up the ceiling. Approaching noiselessly she was infuriated to find one of the housemaids grimacing at herself in a looking-glass and trying on hats from a box which had arrived from London that day.

" Your name is Jackson, isn't it ?," she enquired with frozen dignity, resisting an impulse to box the girl's ears. " Will you ask Mrs. Fenton to come and see me in the drawing-room, in half an hour's time ? "

The scarlet face of the culprit shewed that no further punishment was needed ; and Gloria contented herself with reporting the crime. The name, however, evoked a list of previous convictions ; and, though these all hinged on the charge that girls who had pretty faces—and knew it—were by nature flighty, the old housekeeper ended with an expressed determination to get rid of the girl before serious trouble broke out.

" With one of the men, do you mean ? " asked Gloria.

" Not *in* the house, my lady ; she thinks she's too grand for any of them. But there's a young man from a shop in Gloucester who comes out to see her ; and, when she goes off with him, I never know when she'll be back. She's extravagant, too. If you'd ever seen her on her days out, you'd think she was one of your ladyship's guests ! Silk stockings, if you please ; and patent shoes. I know the wages his lordship pays to every servant in the house ; and good as they are, my lady, if you'll pardon the liberty, they don't *run* to silk stockings."

" And they aren't intended to. Well, Mrs. Fenton, you'd better keep an eye on her ; and, if there's any fresh trouble, she must go. I don't want her to be punished any more for her present offence, though."

The decision had hardly been communicated when the delinquent herself invaded Gloria's bedroom to beg for a private audience. It was part of the debt which Gloria paid to her dignity, and an idea which she had picked up at Abergeldy Castle, that

she never had dealings with the under-servants except in the presence of her housekeeper ; but the girl's pretty face, tear-stained and flushed, persuaded her to compound a breach of discipline ; and she found herself listening to a confession that rebutted the charge of extravagance even if it admitted such impudence that the ordinary standards of crime and punishment had to be discarded. The silk stockings and patent-leather shoes could not be denied ; nor, had Mrs. Fenton elaborated her indictment, could a Paris hat and a long pair of kid-gloves.

" But they weren't mine, my lady," explained Mary Jackson. " I . . . I borrowed them . . . from here. I . . . I've cleaned the shoes and washed the stockings. I promise you I was going to put them back when they were dry, but I was afraid you'd think I'd . . . taken them. I'll *never* do it again ! "

The value of the promise was written in the girl's mouth and eyes. Such weak prettiness and vanity marked her the victim of every tempter. Gloria did not care to contemplate how quickly and far she might fall ; but it was intolerable that her own clothes should be touched by any one else's skin.

" After *this*. . .," she began sternly, only to break off as the girl burst into tears and dropped on her knees.

" You promised me another chance, my lady ! "

" But apparently nothing of mine will be safe so long as it has the good fortune to fit you or you have the good taste to admire yourself in it. Has this ever happened before ? "

" Oh, yes, my lady ! "

The hottest resentment must have cooled before such ingenuous candour ; and Gloria was honest enough to sympathize, against her better judgement, with any lust for unattainable finery.

" How long have you been here ? " she asked.

" Two and a half years, my lady. And I'm so happy here."

" Evidently."

The irony made the girl bite her lip :

" I've never been as long in a place before, my lady. I was always sent away, it was always the same thing. . . . But I've been a good girl, my lady."

" Are you going to be a good girl if I give you another chance ? Will you promise never to borrow anything that doesn't belong to you ? You don't deserve the least consideration, but I'm trying to save you from being sent to prison."

For answer Gloria found her hand caught and made wet with the girl's ready tears :

" Oh, I promise ! "

"Well, see that you keep your promise. Now get up! You must learn to control yourself. And don't cry! That's weakness, and you must learn not to be weak. Did you hear me say you weren't to cry?" she asked with a laugh that quavered perilously.

"I can't help it, my lady!"

Suddenly forgetting her dignity, Gloria found herself kissing the girl's wet cheeks and drying her eyes.

"Don't be a little goose," she whispered. "You make yourself hideous by crying. Great red eyes! Come here!"

Dignity was now so long forgotten that Gloria never thought of being surprised at herself as she bathed the girl's face, kissed her again and sent her from the room. "There, but for the grace of God . . .," she murmured, as the door closed. The moment of uncalculated kindness had cleansed her spirit; and the parting, dumb look of adoration warmed her heart like the voiceless devotion of a dog.

For Freddie's amusement she made a sentimental story of their meeting. Though he smiled in the right places, however; the end of the tale was received with disapproval.

"The sooner that young woman transfers herself elsewhere, the better I shall be pleased," he observed.

"I've promised her a final chance."

"Um. . . . I wonder how much she's taken and *not* brought back. I don't like the idea of keeping a thief in the house."

"Freddie, don't be absurd! She's no more a thief than you are! A very vain, weak girl . . ."

"And, when I've had a warning of this kind, I don't care about retaining the services of very vain, weak girls whose vanity and weakness lead them to walk off with other people's property. A pair of stockings is a small thing: when it comes to a few pearls, say . . ."

"It won't," Gloria interrupted wearily. "I've frightened her . . . and at the same time I've made her quite fond of me."

"I shall have a talk with Mrs. Fenton," Freddie persisted.

"You're not to punish her! If you try to get rid of her without my leave . . ."

"I must find out if there's been any trouble of this kind before."

The subject was dropped perforce for three weeks, as Gloria's confinement began two days later. After twenty-four hours the doctor came into Freddie's room and congratulated him on the birth of a son; and thenceforth, as Gloria looked from her child

to her husband and from her husband to the last loaded tray of letters and parcels, weakness could not cloud her knowledge that she had won back her mastery not only of Freddie but of life.

"I never told you. . . . Promise you won't laugh!" she begged in the first hour of their reconciliation. "I didn't know what you'd think of me. I . . . made a pilgrimage . . . to our magic spring!"

"Before . . . ?"

Gloria nodded:

"When you were in Birmingham last time."

"I suppose a doctor would tell you that the sex of a child is determined rather *more* than a week before birth," he laughed. "But, if once you admit the possibility of miracles, anything may happen. . . . Did you really go there? And make confession?"

"I . . . thought things over. It did me good, I believe; I said to myself we must make a fresh start, Freddie. I . . . felt at peace with every one. When I got back and found that girl trying on my hats . . ."

"By the way, we had to get rid of her," Freddie interrupted.

Gloria sat upright, rigid with anger. It was hopeless to talk of fresh starts, when her own husband invaded her sphere and defied her orders.

"You got *rid* of her? When I *told* you . . ."

Freddie's appeasing smile warned her to wait until she had heard more:

"My dear, it was a hopeless case. I didn't want to worry you—I'm sorry I've mentioned the thing now!—, but I went into it very thoroughly with Mrs. Fenton. There was a whole lot more: she'd been borrowing money from the other servants—it was *called* borrowing—; and she seemed to be absolutely in the power of some man. It was to please him that she dressed herself up, and I gathered that, when they went out together, she did all the paying. . . . Well, you know how that sort of thing ends: we might have had to prosecute her before we knew where we were."

"Or I might have been able to save her," retorted Gloria. "She'd have done anything for me."

"She'd do anything for anybody . . . or promise to."

"And you wouldn't even let me try! What's happened to her?"

"She's gone back to her mother, I believe; somewhere the other side of Gloucester."

"She's not found another place?"

"We couldn't give her much of a character. . . . Gloria, if I were you, I'd let well alone. She's . . . unbalanced. If you'd seen the *stuff* she wrote while you were ill: that you'd get her justice against the people who were in league to ruin her." . . .

"Where's the letter?"

"I tore it up when I'd answered it."

"Oh? Will you please arrange, in future, for all my letters to come to me unopened? I'm quite capable of dealing with them now; and, if I'm not, I can get a secretary . . . who *won't* tear them up before I've seen them."

For fear of helping her to the quarrel which she was seeking, Freddie bowed in silence. The only immediate outcome of the controversy was that Gloria found herself burdened each day with circulars and appeals which Freddie's secretary had formerly poured into the waste-paper basket. She was seeking a dignified excuse for reverting to the old system, when her attention was engaged by an anonymous letter. Grotesquely spelt, ill-written in smudged printing-capitals, insulting in tone and salacious in suggestion, it roused in Gloria only a pitying wonder at the perversity of any human brain that could find satisfaction in hurling crude vituperation from behind the cover of anonymity. Some of the words, never before seen on paper, revolted her with their coarseness; and she had thrown the letter away in disgust before she realized that the foul phrasing hinted at some unclean secret, which might be revealed later.

The envelope and paper, when she re-examined them, were cheap, dirty and uncompromising. There was a South-East London postmark, but no other indication of origin.

"Blackmail," Gloria whispered to herself, as she set out, angry and frightened, for Freddie's study.

Then she paused to reflect, for the hint of the unclean secret was directed at her husband.

CHAPTER THREE

CARLTON GARDENS

IAGO: Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou owedst yesterday.

—SHAKESPEARE: *Othello*.

I

"JUST as we were making a fresh start!" Gloria cried, with the first tears that she had shed since her marriage.

Was she never to know peace or love, even Freddie's love?

At the second and third reading, the four pages of anonymous abuse added more to her disgust than to her knowledge. Their thinly-veiled purpose was to warn her of the infamous life which Freddie openly led, to the scandalization of all decent citizens, though the anonymous writer was unable to restrain a noticeable gusto in describing the abominations that shocked him; from chance phrases about a "vishous arristocracy" the informer might have been inspired by general hatred of her class, but from his ill-concealed desire to cause pain Gloria felt that the attack was aimed at her personally.

Reviewing a generally negative life in which she did little to make close friendships and nothing to arouse deep enmities, she could not imagine why any one should wish to stab her. From the first days of their armed neutrality, she had collected among the servants such allies as could be bought by winning smiles and gracious words; in the minds of their tenants she had methodically left the memory of at least one supererogatory kindness; and, after two years, she could have enlisted a bodyguard to die for her. Had some one been overlooked or injured inadvertently? The discharged housemaid, visibly hysterical and conceivably unbalanced, occurred at once to her mind; but the letter was postmarked in London, and, even if the girl had induced a friend to despatch it for her, an attack from such a

quarter was not in keeping with her manner of doglike devotion.

"I can settle that once and for all by driving over to see her," she decided. "Any one *else* . . ."

On her present data, it was idle to speculate farther. Every asylum had its quota of obscene madmen; and for one who was locked up there must be many who were left at large. It was less unprofitable to puzzle out this charge that "some one" had been "carrying on" with a woman. For the same behaviour a working-man would be turned out of his cottage, even if the neighbours did not "make things too hot" for him to stay; and, if Lady Melby, who was treated throughout with offensive pity, did not know the facts, she could very soon find them out.

Having once refused to destroy the letter, Gloria felt herself punished for her curiosity by being unable to find a single reason why the charges should not be true. The whole countryside knew that she had once left Melby and her husband to a Russian dancer; and, while she remained in London, the first scandal might have been followed by a second and a third. Old Lady Melby's presence was a temporary guarantee against licentiousness in the house itself, but Gloria had never deigned to enquire how long her mother-in-law had stayed. The visitors' book was not to be found; and the servants were too discreet ever to blunder into a hint.

As soon as she was allowed to leave the house Gloria descended without warning upon Mary Jackson.

"I'm not supposed to walk very much as yet, so perhaps you'll come and talk to me in here," she began, as she made room in the car. "I've only just heard that you are no longer with us. I'll say at once that I'm sorry. If I'd not been ill, I'd have tried to do something for you. Perhaps it's not too late even now. What are your plans?"

As she waited for an answer, Gloria noticed that the girl's manner, at first startled and shame-faced, was recovering a little of its old devotion and that her eyes shone with admiration as the timid, sidelong glance took in the details of hat and dress.

"I'm out of a place, my lady," the girl answered hastily, as she looked into Gloria's face and saw that her scrutiny had been observed. "And I shan't get another."

"Well, we'll see. . . . Perhaps one of my friends . . ."

Gloria remembered the London post-mark and watched for a change of expression. "Are you prepared to work in London? Do you know any one there?"

"I'll go there if you say I must, my lady, but all my folk and . . . my friends are in Gloucester."

"You'd better tell me what happened before you left Melby."

At the price of twenty minutes' confused and sometimes tearful history, Gloria succeeded in winning the girl's confidence.

"There *was* money, my lady, that I'd borrowed when mother was ill; and, because I hadn't been able to pay it back, they said I never meant to and it was as good as stealing. It's a wicked untruth, my lady, begging your pardon; and so I told Mrs. Fenton. I said she could stop my wages till it was all paid back, if I might stay on with you. But she always hated me, my lady, and she was waiting her chance to get rid of me."

"Well, we won't go into that," Gloria decreed. "It's time to think about the future. On the whole perhaps this is all for the best: it can't be very comfortable for you if you're always quarrelling with the other servants and fancying that people have a grudge against you."

"Oh, I didn't mind *them*, my lady; it was *you*."

At the note of eagerness in her voice, Gloria looked up to find in the girl's eyes the same glowing adoration as had moved her so deeply before.

"Well, it's . . . nice to hear you say that . . ." she began awkwardly.

"Oh, my lady, I'd work my fingers to the bones if you'd take me back! I always looked after you before you was married; even when it wasn't my place, I wouldn't let none of the others go near you. And I always hoped, when you married Mr. Freddie—his lordship—, that you'd take me for your own maid, my lady. There's nothing I wouldn't have done for you."

Gloria looked out of the window in embarrassment. Until a month before, she was unconscious of having seen the girl six times in two years; she had wholly forgotten that this was the smiling Mary who was always set to look after her in the days when she stayed at Melby before her marriage. She wondered how much this girl, storing up every detail of dress and movement, knew of her relations with Freddie.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be practicable for me to take you back here," she answered. "But if I set up house in London . . ."

"Oh, my lady, are you going away again?"

A sudden ring of jubilation made Gloria stare in amazement:

"What d'you mean?"

"You didn't ought to have come back the first time!"

"You mustn't talk like that, Mary."

"I don't care now, my lady! Mrs. Fenton knew I was always on your side, and I suppose his lordship knew, too; and that's why they got rid of me. But it's a shame; and this time I hope

you *won't* come back ! Let me come and look after you, my lady . . . ”

Gloria interrupted her with an angry shake of her head :

“ I want to know what you mean by talking like this ! I had my suspicions when I came here. Did *you* send me a horrible lying letter . . . ? ”

“ No, my lady ! ”

“ D’you know who did ? ” Gloria asked sternly. “ D’you know anything about a vile, wicked letter ? Have you been talking to any one about his lordship or me ? ”

This time there was hesitation, a stammer and then confused, stubborn silence. The girl’s cheeks flamed, her eyes fell ; and Gloria saw her hands trembling.

“ My lady. . . , ” she began.

“ If you make a clean breast of it, ” said Gloria, taking advantage of her fear, “ I’ll . . . I’ll hear what you have to say and . . . and decide what’s to be done. But if you don’t tell me the *whole* truth, *now* . . . ”

She paused artistically, as the girl covered her face.

The disjointed confession was delivered in tearful fragments. Discharged from Melby as the result of a malevolent conspiracy between her master and Mrs. Fenton, the girl had unloosed her grievances in the hearing of her young admirer from Gloucester ; while she had not even suggested that he should deliver an attack on her behalf, she had certainly told him all her bitter suspicions and infected him with her own indignation.

“ And it is a shame, my lady ! ” she cried. “ And you away in London with your poor father, knowing nothing about it. Wicked . . . ”

“ Don’t go on like that ! ” Gloria broke in. “ So *you’re* responsible for that letter ? Your sweetheart wrote it, but *you* put into his head what he was to write ? ”

“ I said it was a cruel shame for his lordship to go on like that when your poor father was so ill and you with him. ”

The repeated reference to her father convinced Gloria that she had heard aright the first time. The scandal charged against her husband was a thing of recent date, months later than his escapade with the Russian dancer. Her eyes hardened ; and she gripped the convulsive girl by the wrists :

“ Listen to me, Mary ! You’re a very foolish, ignorant girl, and I’m not sure that you’re not a very wicked girl too. I told you once before that I was trying to save you from being sent to prison, but you’ll go to prison in spite of everything if you tell lies like this. D’you know that I could have you prosecuted ? ”

And your sweetheart too? You dare tell me that you want to come back to my service and would do anything for me! And then you tell these foul lies!"

"They *aren't* lies, my lady! I don't know what's in the letter, but everything I said to Jim I can *prove*. And it's a shame! And it was high time some one *did* tell your ladyship."

"Tell me what?" Gloria asked frigidly.

"You say it's all lies, my lady," answered the girl, beginning to cry afresh.

2

Though she failed to elicit details, Gloria had established a date; and she set herself to draw up a time-table that should account for every moment of Freddie's time during the week when he and his mother were alone at Melby. His letters, if they could be believed, indicated that he had usually lunched at home with his agent and that they had once or twice worked so late that the agent had been invited to stay for dinner. Once Freddie had dined at Newbridge; and once Margery Cartwright had come to dine at Melby. Taking nothing on trust, Gloria verified each statement by the *menu*-book and was surprised, at the end of two days, to find herself almost disappointed that each was confirmed by independent authority. Freddie was too circumspect to entangle himself with one of the maids; there had been no visitors and the unbroken chain of *alibis* left no time for a distant intrigue.

"All the same, that girl *wasn't* lying to me," Gloria insisted. "She knew *something*. . . . And I'm going to find out what it is."

When every other means had failed, it might be necessary to conspire again with a discharged servant for testimony against her husband; but for the present Mary Jackson had been frightened into obstinacy. Meanwhile, there had been talk of "a fresh start"; and, whether she moved forward or stood still, Gloria was committing herself irrevocably. The knowledge that she had been betrayed would be less unbearable than the uncertainty whether she had been betrayed or not; and, though she was vowed to patience, her attack only awaited an opportunity which Freddie provided by offering to take her away for a change.

"You know, you're not making a good recovery," he explained. "And it's reacting on the child."

"I've been worried," answered Gloria. "A *horrible* letter . . . Anonymous." . . .

"But you surely don't pay any attention to things of that kind?"

"A charge doesn't cease to be true because it's anonymous."

"Oh, obviously, . . . though you need never trouble to answer a charge if the other fellow wouldn't take the trouble to put his name to it."

"The charge isn't against me. It's against you: while I was in London with father . . ."

Freddie's dignified surprise set her flushing at the memory of four days' stealthy sapping:

"You allowed yourself to read an anonymous charge against your own husband?"

"That name has not always been so much of a protection as I could have wished," she answered with haughtiness that sounded theatrical. "Though you don't bother about anonymous charges, you'll answer them if *I* bring them?"

"Certainly. May I hear the indictment?"

Gloria controlled her tongue and temper before betraying that, as yet, she had no charge to bring:

"In good time. . . . Have you nothing on your conscience, Freddie?"

"Nothing at all. My dear, I thought you at *least* were too sensible even to *read* the lies that people put in anonymous letters."

"If I thought they *were* lies, I should have nothing to worry about."

Wrapping herself in a warm coat, Gloria set out for Melby woods.

"*Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike.*"

The line flashed accusingly through her brain; and she marvelled at the madness of jealousy that had tempted her so clumsily to lash the waters about the head of her elusive fish.

"*I had to find out,*" she told herself, only to discover that she had found out nothing and had put Freddie on his guard. "So much for our new start!"

In the few hours before she met her husband at dinner, she had to decide what to do next. The opinion of the world, so vital to those who aspired to conquer the world by the arts of peace, was against a wife who ran away on suspicion, still more against a wife who made a habit of running away. Two years of armed peace had taught her that she was not yet sufficiently old or hard to dispense with affection; and, though she would despise herself if she ever consented to accept only a share of her husband's

love, she needed his help if she was to grave her name on the history of her generation.

"I *will* find out," she boasted, though the means of torturing Freddie to a confession were not apparent.

She could refuse to bear him more children ; but, now that he had a son, he might not want any more. She could decline to live in the same house ; but a political hostess required a husband for whom she could entertain. She could resume this new life that had been so suddenly interrupted, holding over his head her knowledge that he had been unfaithful and waiting, waiting. . . .

"For something to turn up!" Gloria whispered bitterly. "I *don't* know for certain ; and he knows I don't. Even if I did . . ."

The man who could stray into promiscuous infidelity at a moment when she was watching night and day by her dying father's side, at a moment when the successor to the Melby title, the heir male of his body, was within a few weeks of birth, was not to be intimidated by detection, still less by an uncertain chance of detection. So, six months before, he had humiliated her for a dancing-girl as promiscuous as himself, at a moment when their own first child was hardly weaned and she was herself bowed with disappointment. So he would continue, as she had known and protested in the half-forgotten days when she had refused to marry him.

"And I thought I could hold him." . . .

In those days it was Freddie himself, warning her not to over-estimate her powers, who told her that women would never stalk out of houses if they knew how foolish they looked on their return. If she left him again, she must nerve herself to leave him for ever.

"And start again where I was two years ago . . . with the clothes I stand up in ! I'll do it if I must. . . . Meanwhile . . ."

3

When they met at dinner, she came sheltered behind a breast-work of letters. Whatever the outcome of her duel, she must keep herself to the fore with her neighbours.

"I've been trying to work things out for Christmas," she explained. "Your mother will still be here, of course, and I've invited your brothers. Is there any one else?"

"Not if we're keeping to the usual family party. Later

on, I suppose, there'll be some old scores to work off. If we collected some people for the New Year. . . ? ”

In all the designs nearest her heart Gloria forestalled opposition by pretending that the initiative came from her husband. How far he was deceived she neither knew nor cared.

“ Every one's sure to have a party. . . . I suppose it'll be a charity if we tell them to unload their guests on us for one evening. . . . I'll do that, if you like.”

“ And then we must consider our London plans.”

Gloria hunted through her letters for an invitation from Lord Rainborough :

“ I cannot tell you, my dear Lady Melby, what a service you will do me by bringing your husband to dine here on Wednesday. Archie Murdon is descending upon Tapley ; and, if you know him at all, you know that he does nothing without an object. The state of Denmark, apparently, has something the matter with it, though I confess I have few complaints to make, except to the Chancellor of the Exchequer ; Archie is dissatisfied with the government and wishes to inaugurate revolution from the wholly inappropriate starting-point of the House of Lords. He is constructing a cave and wishes me to enter it ; I shall tell him, when he comes, that I will enter it by deputy. And that deputy will be your husband. On all sides I hear of him as one of the most independent and enlightened of our younger men ; I, on the other hand, have from boyhood enjoyed the backwoodsman's privilege of opposing my ineffectual carcass to long-overdue reform and of being mistaken by junior H. of L. officials for a member of the press. It's time Freddie took a leading part ; and I'm telling Archie that I've found him a recruit.”. . .

Again, for all her bitterness of heart, Gloria smiled inwardly at her success in making others accept the initiative in her schemes. From the moment when Lord Murdon issued a manifesto and set himself to form a conservative free-trade group in the House of Lords, she had worked to include her husband in it ; herself seemingly indifferent, she forced an invitation from the Rainboroughs as soon as it was announced that Lord Murdon was addressing a meeting in Gloucester ; and, though she bantered Freddie for allowing himself to be offered up as a sacrifice to the recruiting passion of their host, she was determined that Lord Rainborough's dinner-party should mark their entry into public life. Her position, considerable as it now was, remained local, like Bella Dixon's in Glamorganshire.

“ Are you involving yourself seriously with Lord Murdon ? ” she asked.

"I thought it might amuse you to spend part of the year in London," Freddie explained, without committing himself; "and this will give us an excuse."

"I expect entertaining politicians will be very like entertaining Gloucestershire worthies."

"I'm not likely to be so much involved that we can't drop it when we're tired of it."

"Ah no! I don't care whether you take up politics or not; but, if you do, that must come before anything else. I'll do my best to help you; but, honestly, Freddie, I'm not going to wear myself out making a success for you, if you're then going to throw everything up. Is that a bargain? . . . Then I suppose the first thing is to find a house; and then I must get it in order for you; and then I must collect a staff. We shall have to duplicate everything; we shall be down here at least as much as we're in London; I mean, you have your position here, your own responsibilities, and you can't let those slide to please Lord Murdon or any one. . . . You'd better leave all that to me; the social side will be my province."

"And you'll do it as brilliantly as you do everything," Freddie declared enthusiastically.

From his tone, Gloria judged that he was trying to bury her memory of their recent scene:

"Isn't it rather late in the day to begin appreciating me?"

"I've always appreciated you. There's no one like you."

"So, when you get tired of me, you always choose some one as different as possible. I suppose some people would regard that as a compliment."

"Even when you know it's not true. . . . Gloria, it's too miserable that after two years of marriage . . ."

"Our marriage should be at an end in everything but name? It was your choice, Freddie. I've always been faithful to you; but I've always told you, too, that I wasn't prepared to share you with any one. I live under the same roof because there are the children to consider; and I do my best to avoid any kind of friction; but you mustn't expect me to regard myself as your wife until I can regard you as my husband, solely, entirely, always, not between whiles."

As she finished speaking, Gloria walked slowly to the door; Freddie, however, was before her and stood with his fingers on the handle, greeting her demonstration with his old ironical smile:

"Before you say I'm only your husband 'betweenwhiles', don't you think you ought to produce some shred of evidence?"

It's a serious charge, though I don't mind that ; what I *do* mind is that we're drifting into an impossible, uncomfortable, wretched way of life for no earthly reason. I want to get back to the early days, Gloria, when we were very happy." . . .

"When you were still in love with me ? "

"I'm in love with you now."

"I'm useful to you, when you want a success down here . . . or in London. . . . But we shan't do any good by talking about it, we shan't do any good till you make up your mind to give me what I ask : your undivided love. In the meantime I'll go on doing my best for you. Your political career . . ." She permitted herself a patronizing smile. "This house in London. . . . Oh, you remember that girl you sent away—*without* consulting me—when I was ill ? I've always wanted to give her another chance. If we're going to start a house in London with a new lot of servants, there'd be no objection to my engaging her there ? The girl's not a thief, as you always try to make out. But we may easily turn her into one by injustice. You don't object ? "

"I'm afraid we may regret it."

Gloria smiled to herself and made no answer.

4

After six weeks' disheartening inspection of unsuitable houses, Gloria found one in Carlton Gardens that satisfied her husband's geographical requirements and afforded an imposing frame for herself. It was her intention to reserve publicity until the decoration was complete ; but Lord Murdon, in advertising the new "independent" party in the House of Lords, could not refrain from a tribute to its latest recruit. Side by side with the announcement that her husband was one of the dark horses whose form should be watched, Gloria read the colourless statement that she would no doubt entertain extensively for the benefit of the new group with which Lord Melby, who had inherited all the ability of his father, the famous banker, had identified himself.

After the first days of uncertainty, the campaign conducted itself. A reputation for success, carefully cultivated at Melby, preceded her to London ; and the excitement which she aroused in others came in time to react on herself.

"Two years." . . .

As she walked from room to room, Gloria found detachment to gaze northward through the majestic windows of her drawing-

room towards Carlton House Chambers and the squalor in which she had been hatched. So Napoleon must sometimes have looked from the windows of the Tuileries on the streets which Lieutenant Buonaparte had lately trod ; and so, in his fullest magnificence, he must sometimes have wished that he could shed his memories of the past as clearly as he had shed the past itself. Josephine, until he divorced her, must have been as great an embarrassment as the admiral, until death mercifully removed him ; and Madame Sans-Gêne must have struck notes as false as did the disreputable old Mr. Jorley whenever Gloria met him exercising his tenants' dogs. There was almost a hint of blackmail in his knowing grin as he threw out a hiccupping "Mornin', Miss Gloria ! Youlalo ! *Kerm 'long, dorgs !*" when Lady Melby was trying hardest to impress her companions. More than once, she had been compelled to explain him away as one of her father's old servants who had sunk so low that he could not be reclaimed.

Failing to banish the memories which Mr. Jorley brought to life, Gloria wondered whether Napoleon felt the absence of love from his life. Norman's place remained to be filled ; but, after her husband's first infidelity, she could not suffer Freddie to fill it. Though she attracted men, she would not admit them to intimacy for fear of losing her moral superiority ; she desired no friendship with women who might become competitors. The Emperor himself had no fewer confidantes ; and, like Napoleon, Gloria had felt constrained to jettison the friends of her irresponsible youth.

"Life doesn't become any *easier*, as one goes on," she decided, with a last look at her handiwork.

The new house was ready ; the world sat waiting for her, like an orchestra with its eyes on the upraised *baton* of the conductor. Her last preparation was an interview that could not be entrusted to a deputy ; and, when she was told that Mary Jackson was in the hall, Gloria set herself to answer whether the score should ever be played.

"I promised I'd do what I could for you," she began. "If I give you another chance, I shall expect you to behave sensibly. . . . Are you still friends with this young man who writes anonymous letters to people he doesn't even know ?"

"I told him he didn't ought to have written like that," the girl fenced. "He was angry that his lordship had sent me away. . . . He meant no harm to *you*, my lady. He was on your side. I don't know what he put in the letter." . . .

"What did you *tell* him ?"

The girl looked round quickly to assure herself that there

was no one else in the room. Her big, restless eyes were full of fear ; but, as she met Gloria's expression of scornful incredulity, the fear changed to impetuous defiance :

" I told him it was a shame ! And you in London, and your poor father dying . . . "

" You can leave my father and me out of it," Gloria interposed, " *What* was a shame ? "

" The way . . . the way his lordship was carrying on," the girl exclaimed in a sudden rush. " Driving about the country. . . . There was times when the car wasn't back till two or three o'clock. I heard it come in, my lady. "

" And how is it any business of yours *what* time his lordship goes out or comes in ? "

" I was on your side, my lady : and it was a shame ! "

Gloria called up her last reserves of patience to engage the rigid ideas and meagre language of the uneducated :

" You've said that before ! You must tell me exactly what you mean ! I don't understand this . . . *nonsense* about taking sides ! Who is this person that his lordship was ' carrying on ' with, as you call it. "

" I mustn't say, my lady. "

" You will say this very minute ! Perhaps it hasn't occurred to you that people who are guilty of slander find themselves . . . *locked up*. I don't know how you would enjoy having your hair cut short and being put into a convict dress with broad arrows all over it. " . . .

Her long agony of tortured pride and unsatisfied curiosity made Gloria hungry to torment the frail, adoring girl in front of her. Already the big eyes were filling with tears ; the sensitive mouth was drooping ; and the lips had to be bitten white to check their trembling.

" I'd . . . best be going now, my lady," gasped the girl between dry sobs.

" Not until you've explained these . . . *lies* you've been telling. Who is this person that you say went about with his lordship ? "

" I mustn't tell you ! "

" Then the only thing is to send for the police," Gloria murmured.

As she stood up and walked slowly towards the bell, her hand was caught, and she turned to find the girl on her knees. Many moments passed before the trembling lips could shape an answer. Then a name was whispered, repeated and at last spoken clearly.

Gloria sighed with disgust as she walked to her writing-table and began to count out the money for the return fare :

"After *this*, you won't expect me to help you. . . . It wasn't enough to throw mud at his lordship ? You had to include Lady Cartwright ? I hope you'll get as much mercy from her as from me. You told this to your sweetheart ? I must know exactly what you said and any one else you told it to. . . . And then . . . *then* I shall know what to do with you."

An hour later Gloria was alone. Though the scene had developed bewilderingly, she had refuted irrefutable evidence, word by word, until her dazed witness doubted her own eyes and ears. Not only was the story kept from spreading, it would be recalled and denied by those who had already told it in good faith ; and in wringing this testimony against her own husband Gloria had even enhanced her personal dignity of bearing. There would be no scandal unless she herself chose to make one.

Still dispassionate, she tested the story in the light of her own knowledge. None of the charges which she had so victoriously explained away conflicted with the time-table of her husband's movements in the week when he had been at Melby without her ; there was at last an explanation why he had been so conveniently at hand when Margery Cartwright collapsed, an explanation too why she had collapsed with a sudden nervous breakdown that threatened to unseat her reason.

"I never expected to hear it was Margery." . . .

Forgotten trifles rose to the surface of her memory. At their first meeting, she had been annoyed to find Freddie indulging in one of his pretty speeches ; they had become very intimate during her own war of secession ; and once, on the night after Prince William's visit, she had seen them disappear into the garden and return with a new light in their eyes ; she had wondered for a moment whether Freddie had been making love and had set her own mind at rest by deciding that Margery would never allow it.

"I can't believe it *now* . . . She was in love with Norman the whole time."

Weary of remaining impersonal, Gloria concentrated her attention on the protagonist in the great betrayal. In stalking the shy and defiling the pure, Freddie must have enjoyed this last adventure more than any in his long history of hunting ; and it was characteristic of him that he should have digged the pit at a time when another woman's insulting presence had driven his wife from the house, characteristic that he should have perfected the trap at a moment when he was swearing in the sight

of God that he would begin a new life, characteristic that he should close the door on his victim at the hour when his wife was called to her father's death-bed. So it had always been : Freddie lost interest in a woman when child-bearing or bereavement kept her from giving him the whole of her attention.

Some time she must decide what to do with Freddie. . . .

Norman's position was curious ; it would be diverting to compare notes with him. . . .

Gloria jumped up and hurried out to the balcony overlooking Carlton Gardens. If she sat staring any longer into the fire, she would lose this protective power of postponing thought. Some time she must decide what to do with Freddie, but not now ! Some time she must get Margery into perspective, but not now ! Some time she must force her whole life into focus, perhaps plan a new life. . . .

But not now !

A mile to the north—less, less than a mile !—Norman and Margery were sitting snugly in their flat. Unsuspecting. . . . But only a lunatic *could* suspect Margery !

"It's a lie ! I ought never to have listened to a girl who's half out of her mind. A little prude like Margery." . . .

Gloria hastened to her writing-table and invited Norman and his wife to dine and inspect the new house. She gave a choice of nights in the next week but one.

"If she refuses . . . If she's afraid to face me. . . ." Gloria whispered as she sealed the letter.

5

The Cartwrights' acceptance arrived the following afternoon.

"*In great haste,*" Margery concluded. "*Norman and I are just off to see my father. It's nearly a year since N. came into the firm ; and he has to make up his mind now whether he's going on with it or whether he'll settle down at Newbridge for good and all.*" . . .

Gloria brooded over the letter for ten minutes and then dropped it into the fire :

"The Cartwrights are dining on Tuesday week," she informed Freddie and watched in vain for a sign of guilt. "I must collect some people to meet them." . . .

In ignorance that he was filling so big a place in Gloria's thoughts, Norman arrived at the door of his father-in-law's room

for a conference which he had been regarding for six months with the profoundest distaste. Now, as on the day when he became engaged, he only wanted to go back to Newbridge as soon as he could escape without dishonour. Though useful, as the responsible Belgian appointment had shewn, he was not indispensable. At the beginning, he had been gladdened by the idea of becoming a partner and wielding the power of a dictator ; but a two years' trial shewed that he was only fit for the position which May-Kingston had originally contemplated for him. To live in Grosvenor Square and feed the firm's customers on an entertaining allowance of £20,000 a year savoured too strongly of wine-merchants' touts and stock-exchange spiders.

So long, too, as he worked in London, Norman was faced with the dilemma of closing Newbridge or living away from Margery ; and, since her illness, the second alternative had become impracticable.

" I'm not blaming *you* in any way," were May-Kingston's first words. " I was responsible for sending you to Belgium and, before that, for keeping you working here when she had to be in the country. But the first thing is to arrange that, whether you go abroad or stay in England, you shall be together. Assuming that to be secured, tell me frankly if you want to stay on with us ? "

" Only if you feel I should let you down by going," Norman answered promptly.

May-Kingston took a deliberate turn round his room, looking down through the big windows, north, south, east and west, on palace, parliament, abbey and cathedral. With the government offices in the middle distance, he seemed to stand at the heart of empire and to dominate it ; stray-away memories of a single day's work, returning to his mind with names gathered from four continents, reinforced a rare sentiment that his labours stood side by side with those of the imperial administration below him in cleaning, tidying and underpinning a world of a thousand million men.

" You never feel that you and Margie are a little young to be settling into one groove? ," he asked.

" I don't feel we have any option. Here's a responsibility that's been entrusted to us—or so I regard it—; and we must take it up when it comes to us."

" The *doctor* favours a change."

" But Margie's simply pining to get back. I really think she's her old self again now."

May-Kingston brought the interview to an end with a private

smile at the simplicity of his upright and wholly literal son-in-law : after eighteen months he had still to discover that Margery's wishes never conflicted with any one else's.

On his side, Norman was justified in boasting of an improvement in health that was maintained until the afternoon of the Melbys' party, when he returned home to find his wife in bed.

"It's just a bit of a head-ache," she explained. "But I shall only make it worse by going out, so I sent a message to Gloria. You won't mind going without me?"

"I'd very much sooner stay here with you," Norman answered.

"But I *said* you were coming; and she's getting another woman. . . . Don't be *too* late, darling! It's very silly of me; but, whenever I let you out of my sight, I have a horrible fear that you're not coming back!"

Observing her cautiously, Norman was alarmed to see that her pupils were dilated with fear as in the first days after her accident.

"I wonder what I can do to cure you of that idea," he mused.

"It's no use my telling you that I love you . . ."

"But it *is*! I want to hear that again and again. Promise to go on loving me, however disappointing I am." Margery's hands, outstretched in supplication, fell suddenly and rose slowly to cover her cheeks: "Norman, I haven't been honest with you. I'm *lying* when I pretend I can't remember things; I remember . . . *everything*, . . . except just what happened when I was unconscious. I could . . . tell you, . . . if you said I must; but I don't want to. I'd like *you* to go on pretending I'd forgotten; and then perhaps I might really forget. . . . Can you forgive that and go on loving me?"

"There's only one thing I can't forgive: and that's your wicked, ridiculous habit of worrying yourself!"

Though he spoke lightly, Norman was unnerved by the tragic intensity of her relapse. Throughout dinner, he was haunted by the bright-eyed ghost of the Margery whom he had married and seen die; his mind was harrowed by tales of women who had lost their wits in childbed; and, when he found himself alone with Gloria, he threw himself and his inexperience on her indulgence.

"It's beaten two doctors and her mother and me," he confessed. "If women are upset over the birth of a child, doesn't that come at once? The breakdown didn't take place till months afterwards."

"You got her all right in Spain?" Gloria enquired gravely. "She's had nothing to worry her since?"

"Nothing in the world."

"But you think there's something preying on her mind?" With a glance at the emptying room, she beckoned him to a seat overlooking the staircase. "Don't answer this, unless you like; but I *should* be interested to know whether you've been bothered by anonymous letters. You haven't? Well, forget that I ever mentioned the subject. Margery and I are very near in age: would it do any good if I had a talk with her?"

Though she whisked her first question away almost before his slow, surprised head-shake, Norman was too much intrigued by her language to follow the false trail.

"Anonymous letters?" he repeated.

"Yes. I *have*; and it's not at all pleasant to feel you've an enemy who will stab in the back like that."

"But d'you mean some one's threatening you?"

"Oh, no! Otherwise, I should very soon have set the police on. It was just vulgar abuse. I have my suspicions: a servant we had to get rid of. . . . I wondered whether you or Margery had been treated to the same attentions."

"I've not heard of anything. If it was a servant of yours . . ."

"There's no reason you should? No. . . . Except that Margery was as good a stick to beat me with as any other."

"But how does she come into it?"

Gloria hesitated and then laughed nervously:

"You know, I'm rather sorry I mentioned it at all; but, if you *are* bothered, I want you to let me know at once. You remember when I came up to nurse my father? Well, Freddie was called back to Melby on business; and I believe he dined with Margery or Margery dined with him or something. On that foundation my anonymous friend has constructed a blood-curdling scandal with times and dates and places. I only had one letter, but it was so circumstantial that I quite expected a little attempt at blackmail to follow." . . .

"What did the letter actually say?"

At the hardening of his tone Gloria laughed reassuringly, then lowered her voice as a group of men advanced from the drawing-room:

"Well, not to put too fine a point on it, she was . . . accorded the honour of being Freddie's mistress; and, if I didn't believe it, I was invited to ask him or her or any one in the neighbourhood. . . . Lord Murdon, you're not going! I'm sure you can't have discussed all your business yet." . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

VINDICATION

Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old ;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of Gold :
The kindest use a knife, because
The dead so soon grow cold.
—OSCAR WILDE : *The Ballad of Reading Gaol.*

I

FROM the head of the stairs, leaning forward and gripping the ebony rail until her finger-nails whitened, Gloria watched her last guests leaving. Lord Murdon and a man whose back she could not identify walked with linked arms and a convivial lurch ; Freddie, with his hands in his pockets and a cigarette carried at a jaunty angle in a long amber holder, walked behind them with a careless swing of his shoulders and hips ; ahead and alone, Norman stalked with rigid back and stiff movements.

As they disappeared from view, she returned to the drawing-room and lighted a cigarette. Two years. . . . It was hard to realize that she was going back to the place which she had occupied before her marriage, that this first party in their new house marked the end of their life together. But nothing else was possible. . . .

"My dear, I congratulate you on the party and on the house !" Without turning, Gloria knew from her husband's ingratiating voice that he had a part to play. "Murdon would like us to do this once or twice a week throughout the season."

"I don't know how far you'll be able to count on my help," Gloria murmured to the glowing end of her cigarette.

"You mustn't do it a moment longer than it amuses you. . . . I was sorry to hear from Norman that his wife's seedy again. Is this a legacy of the concussion ?"

"I don't think so. The concussion dropped a curtain over

her mind and probably saved her from going mad. It ended things, too. But I don't believe she'll be all right till she's made a clean breast of it." Without modifying her level tone, Gloria looked up and met her husband's eyes. "Until she's told him about your week together in the country."

"Our week together?" he repeated with a slight frown.

"Yes. I've heard all about it. You remember I asked you whether you had anything on your conscience. I could give you an account of your movements at any hour of the day or night during that week. What have you to say about it?"

"If you know so much already, it seems superfluous for me to add anything," he answered with an easy smile.

"I'm thinking of the future. You can hardly expect me to live in the same house when you fill it with your mistresses . . . and choose them from *our nearest neighbours*. So we'd better make our plans."

Crossing the room to the middle window, Gloria shook out a curtain that was hanging crooked. Two tables next engaged her attention; and she changed their places, surveying them with her head bent critically on one side. Though to Freddie and to her guests everything had seemed faultlessly arranged, this fastidious indecision hinted that the big house in London, the plunge into political life, her very marriage were all experimental. Her composure was a warning that she was not to be coaxed or bullied; and her choice of time and place, after the first party in their new house, shewed that she was fighting by a considered plan of attack. Never, since she consented to marry him, had her position been so strong as now, when she encouraged him to make a spectacular appearance in public life and then threatened to desert him on the threshold.

"I hope we shall be able to arrive at a permanent settlement," Freddie responded with a show of good will. "I believe that's the phrase always used in labour disputes. This eternal threat of strikes and lock-outs is very disturbing."

"It's useless unless it's permanent," Gloria agreed. "I don't know that 'strike' is a very happy word when one party refuses to be victimized any longer. . . . However . . . the *essentials*. . . . You realize that our present life can't go on?"

"I'm . . . afraid I don't, . . . though I should like . . . to see it . . . inspired with greater sweetness."

"Ah, then I shall have to convince you. There'll be no difficulty about the evidence or the witnesses." . . .

"I confess I don't see how they'll help you," Freddie interrupted.

"They'll help me to my freedom."

"Not until the law is changed. If by freedom you mean divorce, you must prove infidelity *and* desertion or cruelty. As you cannot prove that and as I have no intention of helping you, all discussion of divorce can be ruled out ; and I'm sorry it has been mentioned."

The tone of rebuke brought a flush to Gloria's cheeks and warned her that, as she must not be coaxed or bullied, so she must not be goaded into losing her temper.

"It was not of my choosing," she sighed. "It's not I who make it impossible for us to live together. If you refuse me a divorce, I must take other steps."

"By making yourself the guilty party? You mustn't count on my helping you even then."

"No, I wasn't thinking of that. . . . I must live elsewhere. You, I suppose, will spend half the year in London now and the rest of the time at Melby." . . .

"That will depend on you. I naturally wish to spend as much time as possible with my wife."

"You have repudiated me as your wife."

"My dear, which of us was it who talked of living 'elsewhere'?"

"You're driving me out of the house."

"I'm urging you to stay. I don't share your liking for a peripatetic marriage. If you leave here, I must of course come with you ; but it seems a pity, with Melby and this place. . . . I'm not going to let you run away again, Gloria."

"You can't stop me!"

"No? I wonder how you think you're going to live."

"You don't imagine you can *starve* me?"

Freddie lighted a fresh cigarette and stationed himself with his back to the fire-place, rocking rhythmically from heel to toe and jerking up his coat-tails every time that he bent forward :

"Everything that you want for yourself or the children will be supplied at Melby or here. . . . You would be far less well off under a separation . . . if you got it ; and under a separation you might see less of the children as well as losing nine-tenths of all that matters to you in life. You enjoyed your party to-night, though you pretend you gave it for *me* ; and I'm prepared to back you in this political game, though it bores me to extinction. You like your new house and the position you're making for yourself in London, just as you liked Melby and the position you made for yourself there. The sympathy of your friends, if you have any, is a poor substitute. If you look back over the

last two years, you'll recollect that Lady Melby has never asked for anything that hasn't been given her. It was the least I could do, when you married me as a favour ; but, before you talk of my repudiating you as a wife, remember how often you've assured me—and every one else—that you were never in love with me ; ask yourself if you haven't repudiated me as a husband." Gloria half rose from her chair, but the insolent, rocking movement discouraged her from interrupting. " You only married me—with rather a bad grace—when I convinced you that you could never marry Norman Cartwright ; I decided to take the risk. At the same time I was to love you so wholeheartedly that I could never dream of looking at another woman ; I warned you that a marriage of that kind was the marriage of a dream. That was the risk *you* took ; and, if you ever fancy that I've neglected you . . ."

" *Fancy !* " she broke out.

" . . . You must ask yourself whether the woman who boasts she's never loved me is entitled to expect anything else." The flapping coat-tails beat time twice before he went on. " It tickled your vanity to feel that I wanted to marry you against your inclinations ; and, by repeating like a daily confession to people like Dot St. John that you didn't care two straws for me, you imagined no doubt that you were keeping some kind of faith with your old love for Norman ; but that confession doesn't come well from a woman who demands at least a hundred *per cent.* of her husband's attention. You'll have a stronger case when you can say that you've left no stone unturned to win and keep my love. Until then, discussions like this are rather unprofitable."

Abruptly, with his last word, Freddie walked to the door and held it open for her. Gloria had no answer to a charge which he—characteristically—had matured for two years ; but his gesture of dismissal goaded her beyond discretion.

" You admit this affair with Margery Cartwright ? " she asked with the air of one who had patiently waited for him to make an end of his clumsy digressions.

" I admit nothing, not even your right to play inquisitor."

" As your wife . . ."

" You've assured me repeatedly that you no longer regard yourself as my wife. . . . If you're going to sit up, will you turn out the lights after you ? I told the men they could go to bed and I must go to bed myself ; I've arranged a meeting with Murdon at half-past nine to-morrow."

As the door closed quietly behind him, Gloria rose and opened a window. Though the air of a spring night blew wintrily from the north, she was glad to cool her eyes from their double smarting of heat and indignation. Once again her attack had been caught and flung back in the moment that she delivered it ; once again she had been afraid to press it ; once again she had to decide on her next step. Had Freddie ever made the mistake of overreaching himself, he might have taunted her with being his mistress before they married and of behaving like a mistress when she was his wife. But his biggest guns had not been brought into action. . . .

Looking across the moonlit road—empty but for an impassive policeman and a single belated diner—Gloria stared at the pall of brown darkness overhanging the streets and houses north of Pall Mall.

"Lady Melby has never asked for anything that hasn't been given her . . ."

Carlton House Chambers to Carlton Gardens !

Her triumph would have turned the heads of other women ; it had almost made her forget the loss of Norman. . . .

Norman. . . .

Gloria wondered what he would do with the suspicion which she had sown in his mind ; she wondered, too, why she had set it there before engaging in a duel with her husband. To punish Freddie for his perfidy or Norman for his indifference ? Was he too pacing up and down, like the man there with the bitten cigar, thinking things to rights ?

As though her thought made him conscious of her presence, the strayed reveller paused on coming opposite to the house and looked up at the balcony where she was standing. After staring for a moment in perplexity, he hurried across the road and took off his hat. In the light of a street-lamp Gloria recognized Norman ; seeing him, she felt that she had known all the time that it could be no one else ; and, when he pointed first to her, then to himself, then to the front door, she nodded and went back into the house with a sense that she had been waiting for him.

"Is anything the matter ?" she whispered, after long fumbling at the door. "I never saw you until this moment." . . .

"Let me in," whispered Norman brusquely.

While she turned on the lights, he sank on to a stone seat at the entrance to the hall and sat with his head in his hands ;

slipping from nerveless fingers, his hat rolled jauntily away, and a dead cigar, bitten savagely out of shape, fell to the ground.

"Aren't you well? Is there anything I can get you?" asked Gloria.

"No, no, thanks! I've been thinking over what you said: about that letter, I mean. So, when I saw you on the balcony . . ."

"But, my dear . . . Oh, I wish I'd never told you now! It was just a cruel, horrible trick; and, thank Heavens! I never gave it another thought till it occurred to me that, if Margery had been treated in the same way, that might be the root of all her troubles."

"Can you remember what was said?"

"I must spare you some of the refinements." As she began to quote a list of times and places, Norman took out a pencil and made notes on his shirt-cuff. "My own explanation is quite simple. There was a girl who was discharged—perhaps with rather more justice than mercy—; she took her revenge by trying to start a scandal and drag in as many people as possible. If she could say definitely that Freddie and Margery had been seen to meet . . ."

Norman glanced at his cuff and then looked up for a moment in Gloria's face:

"And is this . . . accurate?"

"I should think so. And if it had been any other woman in the world . . . But *Margery*! Have you really been walking up and down for half an hour wondering whether it was true?"

For several moments there was no answer. Norman kicked the cigar-end into the fire-place; then, observing his hat, he picked it up and brushed it carefully against his sleeve.

"I didn't know what to think," he confessed at last. "Margie's so strange: if I stayed away for a night, she'd think I was never coming back. . . . I remember *I* was pretty shaky after I was wounded in the head; I thought it was the same with her; but she's told me . . . that she . . . hasn't forgotten anything. . . . She'll tell me if I like . . . but she'd rather not, . . . because she's doing everything in her power . . . to forget." . . .

"To forget *what*?"

"How should I know?" Norman looked up for a moment, then turned again with a tightening of the muscles in his face. "I may be doing Freddie a frightful injustice, but I've never had it explained to me why he was at Newbridge when the accident took place. If—you must forgive me for saying this, Gloria—if he tried to kiss her and they had a struggle . . . That explains

the accident, perhaps it explains her saying that she remembers something that she'd give anything to forget." . . .

"But if *he* tried to kiss *her* . . . and she resisted? She *would*! We always used to say that, when you were in the room, she seemed quite unconscious of every one else."

There was another silence; and Norman sprang up with a new unlighted cigar in his mouth, to resume his prowling walk. In the white glare of an immense electric chandelier, his face, which had been pale before, seemed to have fallen into fleshless hollows.

"If *she* kissed *him*. . . ?" he threw out, as though the charge were choking him. "If they . . . flirted a bit . . . Not a hanging offence; but if you've been brought up very strictly . . ."

"You're exaggerating Freddie's fascination."

"You . . ." Norman checked in embarrassment. "You will admit," he went on, "that many women have been attracted by him."

"Go on as you began," Gloria recommended tranquilly. "You were going to say: '*You* fell in love with him.' I didn't. . . . And now that it's all so long over, I'm glad to be able to tell you so. He'd been wanting to marry me for years; I always refused . . . because I wasn't in love with him. Then . . . I told you . . . at the time . . ." She wavered for a moment before a brilliant improvisation, then clutched at it. "My father . . . had been pawning things he'd got on credit. I *had* to find money for him if I committed murder to get it. There was only one thing I could sell; and I sold it. . . . Myself. . . . I only tell you this because I must *convince* you that there's nothing in heaven or earth I wouldn't do for you . . . God! . . . There was a time, Norman, when I knew you were miserable, and I could do nothing, nothing for you. And then, thank heaven, you met Margery! I know you won't bring this up against me; but you're miserable again, and, if I can do anything for you, I will. That's my story. And now it's time we said good-night; *more* than time, though I don't regret this talk if it's cleared your mind and made you happier than when I saw you prowling Carlton Gardens like a caged lion."

"I wish I knew what *was* the matter," he sighed.

Gloria stole a glance at his bent head and worried eyes:

"Why don't you ask her? She says she'll tell you if you really want to know. If she *has* received a letter like mine . . . The exasperating thing, as you must have seen, is that, if a black-mailer *is* at work, it's almost impossible to bring him to book: whatever horrible construction he chooses to put on perfectly

innocent meetings, we couldn't deny that Freddie *did* dine with her alone at Newbridge, he *did* sit talking till a most disgraceful hour. And Margery *did* dine alone with him . . . very late . . . when they came in from motoring . . . after my mother-in-law had gone to bed, as the letter says. Mark you, I think Margery's unwittingly been very indiscreet; and it was abominable of Freddie to let her put herself in a false position; but, if you'd been married to him for a couple of years, you'd know that the amusement of the moment overrides everything. If *that* is what's worrying her, you'd much better persuade her to make a clean breast of it; and then tell her not to worry her silly little head over nothing." . . .

3

As the ring of his footsteps on the pavement grew fainter, Gloria turned out the lights and walked wearily upstairs. To her dismay, Freddie's door stood open; and, as she passed it, he called out to her.

"I hope there's no worse news of Margery," he said, looking up over the top of his book.

If the last two years had taught her little else, they had trained Gloria to conceal every sign of surprise:

"No. . . . She's not told him anything yet, and I think that's preying on her mind . . . Freddie, I thought I knew the general range of your iniquity, but didn't even you feel a twinge of conscience about that child? She *was* a child, you know."

"I thought we'd disposed of my conscience some months ago . . . at Melby. Must we reopen the search?"

"I've not the least desire to . . . I was only . . . curious. I suppose it was a new experience to you. Years ago, before I ever knew you, I was told that you'd had an affair with a woman and that, when there was some talk of a divorce, you offered to lend the husband a car to drive to the law courts. I couldn't help thinking of that when I heard about you and Margery . . . and then remembered that you'd gone to meet Norman with a car—and a luncheon-basket, I think?—when he flew over from Brussels. . . . I want to know what you propose to do if Norman makes up his mind to divorce Margery."

"I really haven't thought. It seems rather their business."

"But if you're cited as a co-respondent?"

"Oh, I should certainly attend. Or get some one to represent me."

Hardly expecting to sleep, Gloria felt little resentment in

listening for the deep quarters of Big Ben and watching the yellow light from the street-lamps chilling to blue-grey and fading before a diamond-clear white that in turn quickly warmed to orange. After two hard-fought encounters with her husband and two more with Norman, she was content to trace patterns in the intricate moulding of the ceiling and to watch the polished outline of the furniture taking shape in the dawn ; if once she began to think, there was no imaginable end to thought.

The coming of full day drove before it the sense of inert security which she had been able to foster in the warm half-darkness of her room. To-day was drearily like yesterday ; to-morrow would be like to-day ; and all her life would be like to-morrow. Too miserable to sleep and too restless to read, she put on a wrap and walked downstairs in the hope of finding mechanical household work to keep her employed. Faint universal disorder, brooding silence and a lingering blend of stale scent and smoke invested the house with a disreputable air of interrupted orgy : if the end of the world had been proclaimed in the middle of her party, the announcement could hardly have produced a greater effect of solitude or of broken continuity.

In one sense the end of the world had been proclaimed ; their late guests would look back on this night as the last hours before the downfall ; and, thanks to her impatience, she had set in motion a divorce that would humiliate her without bringing freedom.

" Unless Freddie has a fatal accident . . . out shooting . . . with Norman . . . "

Gloria sprang from her chair and smothered a little scream of terror as the slam of a door resounded through the slumbering house. It was followed by the noise of shuffling feet and the clank of a pail, then by the rattle of chains and the majestic creak of a door opening. Biting her lips in mortification at betraying her nervousness, she collected her scattered papers and walked to the window in time to see a tousled maid kneeling on a straw mat and beginning, with the reluctance of long repetition, to wash the steps. Mechanically she looked at her watch, noting that the girl was half an hour late at her work, then became fascinated by the interest of hearing the big, silent house stirring to life. Other doors slammed, blinds whirled up with a quick rattle ; curtains were drawn apart with the softer sweep of wooden rings on wooden poles ; and windows were thrown open with a high and almost human note.

As the house awoke, the city seemed to wake with it ; and Gloria continued to stand at the window as the new day was

heralded by a humble army^m of paper-boys and milk-men. The policeman whom she had watched overnight, or a substitute no less impassive, stood motionless at the corner of the road ; and, as her eyes turned in search of the restless prowler of the night before, she started back and watched from behind the curtain the figure of a man crossing the road to the door below her. Though his head was bent, she could never mistake the carriage of his body ; and, as he paused to address the girl on the steps, Gloria caught sight of his haggard face and blue, unshaven chin.

Hurrying downstairs, she reached the hall as the door closed behind Norman's back.

" Oh, here's her ladyship ! " exclaimed the maid in breathless surprise.

" Norman ! What are you doing at *this* unearthly hour ? "

" I must apologize for coming like this . . . "

As the three voices met in high, simultaneous conflict, Gloria beckoned him to the study and closed the door behind him :

" You must excuse my appearance. I wasn't expecting any one so early. I find the morning's such a wonderful opportunity for getting through odd jobs . . . before the letters . . . and when no one thinks of telephoning."

" I came to see Freddie," Norman interrupted.

The rasping menace in his voice told her more than an hour's questioning would have elicited.

" But he's gone, I'm afraid," she answered with a speed that amazed her. " He has a board-meeting in Birmingham this morning and he went off last night by car, as soon as you'd all gone."

" When will he be back ? "

" He couldn't say for certain."

Thrown out of his stride by the announcement that Freddie was no longer in the house, Norman stood dazed and helpless.

" Gone ? . . . " he muttered.

" Sit down and tell me what's happened," Gloria counselled as soon as she was satisfied that her story would rest unchallenged.

" I came to have a settlement with him," said Norman between his teeth. " That letter . . . It was true, Gloria."

His restless eyes met hers for a moment before sweeping the room in a wild, dumb invitation of denial. Spared the necessity of expressing surprise or horror, Gloria buried her face in her hands and waited for him to tell her more.

" It can't be true, Norman," she whispered, as the silence lengthened.

"Margery admits it. And I want two minutes' talk with Freddie."

Tired though her brain was, Gloria had never known it to work so quickly. It was but a moment since she had thought of a shooting "accident" as her one chance of escape; in another she could send Norman upstairs to set her free. If ever a man deserved to be killed, it was Freddie. . . .

A single report; turmoil of hurrying feet; ringing of bells and slamming of doors. In less than five minutes it would all be over; her stolid policeman would be marching Norman away. One shot. . . .

Gloria gripped her chair and prayed for courage.

It was no good. She, she of all people was going to save Freddie because she could not bear the noise of a revolver-shot echoing and echoing through the silent house. Blood? There was plenty of that in hospital. And once, in an air-raid, she had seen the wooden shutters of a shop-window splattered with brains. But that noise, which she would never be able to forget! And the eternity of waiting while Norman tiptoed upstairs. That was enough to drive any one mad. . . .

"I'm . . . *thankful* he's not here And you may be thankful too." . . .

"There's only one way of treating gentry like that."

"But, Norman, you don't want to be tried for *murder*? What good will that do? To Margery, yourself, your child? You must be mad to *dream* of such a thing! If that's a revolver in your pocket, take out the cartridges and give it to me. Then swear to me by the head of your *son* that you won't do anything violent. If you don't do just what I tell you, I shall send for the police. . . . But that won't be necessary, will it? You don't want your son to be brought up without a father because his father . . . has been *hanged* . . . for murder. Norman, please! . . . Unload it first . . . oh, and put it in this drawer, I don't want to touch it; these things frighten me out of my life."

Obediently as though he were hypnotized, Norman emptied the cartridges on to a table and tossed the revolver into a drawer. For a moment he stood as though wondering what to do next, then collapsed over the back of a chair and lay torn with tearless weeping. If she had been frightened before by the blood-lust in his eyes, Gloria was more frightened now by his inarticulate moaning; in an older man she would have looked for a stroke, in a man of any age she expected nothing less than a physical bursting of heart. So even Norman Cartwright sometimes betrayed his emotions!

"I'll . . . go . . . now," he gasped.

"You must wait till you're a bit steadier. Sit down and have something to smoke. I want to know what you're going to do. . . . At home, I mean."

"I haven't thought."

"Then you ought to think now. If you go back to Margery in your present state . . ."

With flickering eye-lids Norman stared dizzily round the chill, unkempt room, frowning in surprise at the ash-strewn grate and littered table, summoning all his wits to explain why Gloria was dressed in a grey-silk tea-gown and lace cap, why the morning sunlight shewed him to be wearing dusty dress-shoes and a crumpled shirt.

"What's the time?" he asked sleepily.

"I don't know! It doesn't matter! How did you leave Margery? Can you remember what happened?"

"Yes. . . . At least, I think so. . . . That letter . . . I thought about it all the way home. When I found her awake . . . terrified because I was so late. . . , I tackled her . . . anonymous letters. . . . I told her I understood . . . her name . . . and Freddie's . . . She went white as a sheet, I thought I'd killed her. . . . And then . . . then the whole thing came out. . ." Norman's speech and brain seemed suddenly to clear. "She'd been . . . *bewitched*; it wasn't *Margie* at all; she couldn't put up a fight! All the time, she was praying she might die . . . ; but when he whistled . . . Drugged . . . Her own word. . . . It went on till she had her smash; and then she was free of him . . . saw what she'd done . . . tried to face up to telling me . . . wanted to make sure of me first . . ."

As the halting voice died away, Gloria slipped out of the room and came back with a tumbler of water, to find that her absence had been unmarked:

"And what now?"

"I've not had time to think . . . There was only one thing to be done, as far as I could see; and I went off to do it . . . My God, that's twice he's done me down!"

Leaping up from his chair, Norman stood swaying with the tumbler raised above his head; then subsided and mechanically mopped the spilt water from his clothes.

"Steady!" whispered Gloria.

There was a tinkle of broken glass and a muttered apology as he stood up and swept the forgotten tumbler to the floor. Gloria went with him into the hall and, returning alone to the study window, watched his bent back and indecisive walk until

he disappeared from sight. A clock, striking eight, reminded her that she was hungry ; and, ringing for her maid, she ordered her bath and breakfast to be prepared.

"I'm afraid poor Lady Cartwright isn't at all well. Sir Norman has been asking my advice about her," she volunteered, hardly caring whether the explanation would still the chatter of the gaping girl who had let him in. "Do you know if his lordship is getting up yet?"

"I believe not, my lady. I've not heard his bell."

4

Half way to her room, Gloria checked and descended again to the study ; though the revolver was securely hidden in its drawer, the cartridges still lay scattered on the table where Norman had jerked them out. Collecting them in her handkerchief, she once more mounted the stairs and paused to listen at the door of her husband's room. At the sound of whistling she knocked and went in to find him standing half dressed by the window, filing his nails.

"My dear, why didn't you take things easy this morning?" he enquired solicitously. "You were very late last night."

"I couldn't sleep," she answered. "And then Norman came here again."

Without looking up, Freddie allowed his forehead to pucker in a frown :

"I nearly came down to remind him that two and seven in the morning are equally unconventional times for calling."

"It's as well you didn't. He came to see you, but I said you'd gone to . . . Birmingham, I think it was." Opening her handkerchief, Gloria spread the six cartridges on his dressing-table. "I've saved you something this morning, Freddie. I wonder whether I shall regret it."

Fully conscious that she was watching for the least change of expression in a face that was turned to the sun, Freddie laid down his file and crossed the room to Gloria's side, where he bent enquiringly over the six little grey-and-yellow objects.

"Where do these come from?" he asked, picking up one of the cartridges and then looking with incongruous petulance at two stains of grease on his fingers.

"Norman . . . I made him take them out for fear of accidents. He brought a revolver. . . . I've told you already it was you he came to see. Is it worth while bluffing any longer, Freddie?"

"I didn't know I was. I don't remember having said more than about two words."

"You're bluffing by your attitude. Margery has confessed that you were her lover; and Norman came here for . . . a settlement, I think he called it. This is the second time you've got in his way. I asked him how it could possibly be worth his while to be hanged for murder as the price of ridding the world of you; I sent him home to think things over quietly, to decide what he was going to do. And it's time *we* decided that, Freddie, on our own account. I suppose I may accept Margery's confession?"

"I shouldn't dream of contradicting a lady." . . . He paused as a knock was heard at the door and one of the footmen entered with a tray. "Is that for me, John?" he asked. "Well, will you give it to her ladyship and bring up another one for me? . . . What was I saying? Oh, yes: you were telling me you'd checked our young friend's homicidal tendencies. What is he going to do next?"

"He doesn't know yet. . . . If he divorces Margery, will you marry her?"

"Well, you know, there's a conventional prejudice against bigamy; a legal bar, too, I believe."

"But it won't be bigamy if I'm given an opportunity of divorcing you."

"Ah, no. . . . Do you think Margery and I are likely to make a success of it?"

"I'm not a good judge. If I had been, I should not have married you."

"D'you know, I don't believe that covers anything like the whole ground: I could make a sort of seventy-five *per cent.* success of any marriage I entered on if my wife played up properly; and you could make a ninety-five *per cent.* success even with me, even at the present time, if we both played up."

A second knock interrupted them, and Gloria stood stiff and silent while the table was wheeled into the middle of the room and their breakfast was disposed upon it. The forced familiarity of consuming toast and coffee in Freddie's dressing-room added the last touch of the grotesque to a scene that in every part and at every moment brought her within perilous neighbourhood of hysteria. Under the tea-gown and lace cap she was chilled with fatigue and with the keenness of the morning air, which beat down on her from Freddie's open windows; his fresh colour and clear eyes put her at a disadvantage; and in the act of making her breakfast with him as though they were on their honeymoon

he assumed unhesitating direction of her will as he had already seized control of the conversation.

"Let's avoid recriminations," she suggested wearily, when they were alone once more. "If Norman divorces Margery on your account, it will be only natural for me to divorce you; and, after all you've made me suffer, it's your duty to give me just the technical help I need. You don't want to spoil my life any more . . . just because I've run straight?"

"And if Norman doesn't divorce her?" Freddie asked. "If I could look back on four hundred years of family history without a single scandal, I should say it was time to have a big one. That's not Norman's point of view, though. And it may simplify things if you rule out any idea that I'm going to upset our marriage until it's had a fair trial. When you're truly my wife . . . and no longer find it necessary to remind me that you made a loveless *mariage de convenance*, you will discover that it's quite easy to keep my love; you're the only person I ever wanted to marry. . . . These trials of strength effect nothing: you're honest enough with yourself to know that you generally come off second-best and to remember—though it's a thing no woman ever confesses—that you married me *partly* because you were afraid to stand alone; you'd think even worse of me than you do if I didn't . . . let's say keep my end up." . . . Walking to the window, he lighted a cigarette and turned to face her, with his hands on the sill. "What d'you expect of life, Gloria? What d'you want? I've known women who were sex-mad; and, poor devils, you may thank your stars you're not one of them; I've known women who were maternity-mad, women who cared only for power over their fellow-creatures, women who were limelight-mad. I'm convinced that you've never *quite* made up your mind what you want. Two years, two and a half years ago you were *really* in love with Norman." To her surprise Gloria found herself nodding. "He was the biggest thing in your life?"

"Yes."

"You've outgrown that?"

With a flash of illumination, Gloria recognized that she had only ceased to love Norman when she set herself, nine hours before, to wreck his life:

"Yes."

"But you've never succeeded in putting any one in his place. Quite disinterestedly, Gloria, I think that's a pity. For two years you've been looking for distractions, but what *is* it you want?"

Nervous exhaustion and the quiet caress in his voice weakened Gloria's resistance till she found equal difficulty in preserving her resentment and in keeping her lips steady.

"You always say you know me so well," she reminded him, as she laid a cold hand over aching eyes.

The light, filtering between her fingers, grew suddenly brighter as he moved noiselessly from the window to her side.

"You want the ordinary things," she heard. "You want to be loved . . . and you want to love in return. You want your children. You want success." . . .

"I don't seem to get what I want."

"It's all there, waiting for you to take it."

"I get no happiness from your love when you share it with other people. And I don't think I'd have mentioned children, if I'd been you, Freddie. . . . Success? I didn't see why dull, fifth-rate people should always take the lead. . . . I've learnt that these things require time!"

"If you're thinking of Newbridge, there's no rivalry to fear in that quarter."

For the first time the facile caress of his voice failed to soothe her. In a second flash of illumination, she realized that Margery succeeded always where she failed. Born rich and brought up in shelter, she soured the wine which Gloria had to drink. It was Margery who had married and consoled the man she loved, Margery who stole the honour for which she had worked, Margery who controlled the courses of nature and had a son for no better reason than that she wanted one. And it was Margery, in this last contest, whose fresher charms had been preferred to hers.

"There's no rivalry between an ant and an elephant," Gloria cried.

"You're in undisputed possession. . . . Sweetheart, will you make a bargain? I won't let you go, because I need you too badly; and you won't want to go if we make a success of our life. But you must help me! Whatever you want in life is waiting for you. Norman isn't going to make a scandal; but *he* knows . . . and *you* know . . . and *I* know. . . . We shall see very little of them. . . . Will you make that bargain, Gloria?"

As she sat without answering, Freddie bent over her chair and lifted her into his arms. A futile memory of old resolve, taken when her brain was less torpid, her body less chilled, the

whole of life less bankrupt of hope, mocked her with a phrase of warning that on her attitude in this first encounter depended the whole of her future ; by letting Freddie touch her, take her in his arms, kiss her quavering lips, press her to him till her heart beat out its hammer-strokes on his chest, she was yielding a position which she would never be able to recapture. Like every other surrender, this one was worth while to a tired brain and spirit in that it dispensed them from further struggle and further thought ; as drowsiness descended upon her in the warm security of his embrace, she wondered why she had not yielded before and what he had done to win this forgiveness.

" We shall see very little of them." . . .

In some way Gloria was to understand that she had achieved vindication and could afford to forget the earlier wounds to her pride. A circle in her life had been completed ; once before, in the dawn of their days together, she had rested with her cheek against Freddie's, crying softly at the death of an old love ; now, after weary trudging, she had returned to find herself justified and her choice approved.

The long secret struggle with Norman and Margery had ended in their annihilation : their hateful dignity was in the mud ; never again would either of them, knowing what she knew, dare to look her in the eyes.

" I accept it, Freddie, . . . your bargain. . . . We'll . . . begin again from the beginning. . . . It's time I had a little happiness."

" It's more than time . . . for us both."

" Let me go now. I'm *dizzy* with want of sleep. Freddie, what will you do when you see Norman ? You can't pretend that he doesn't know."

" Why not wait till we see him ? It won't be for some years. He'll go abroad. . . . Now I'm going to put you to bed ; and you're not to get up till dinner-time."

" I must have my bath first. You may come and see if I'm asleep in half-an-hour."

When she reached her bathroom, Gloria found that the water was long chilled. As it ran away to make room for the hot, she stood at the window, looking down once more on the sober, deserted roadway of Carlton Gardens. A policeman stood at the corner ; and, more from habit than expectation, she looked towards Pall Mall for the form of Norman Cartwright, hesitating in the tortures of suspicion, or hurrying in vengeful certainty, or shambling away in dazed helplessness.

" That's twice he's done me down !"

Her relish for the hoarse agony of his tone shocked Gloria a little and interested her more than a little : for the first time in more than two years she felt wholly free of him, no longer tugged by the memory of even a divided allegiance. The bent back and halting gait had brought her fierce pleasure as she watched him from the study window ; and, though she was debarred from watching him now, her imagination took heady delight in the thought of the long scene which he must even now be enacting with Margery.

As she turned from the window, she asked herself for a moment what either had done to merit such hatred ; but the answer was too long and complicated. She would not have wasted a thought on him if he had not forced himself on her memory.

*" And all men kill the thing they love
By all let this be heard. . . "*

She was still trying to remember how the verse ended when her husband's voice told her that it was time for her to be in bed and asleep.

EPILOGUE

THE library at Newbridge, already grey from the smoke of three cigars, became so hot as the sun stole round its eastern angle that Norman was grateful when May-Kingston, usually impervious to atmosphere, suggested that they should suspend work until after luncheon. As Norman rattled up the estate-map under its faded valance and watched his solicitor filling a wallet with papers, he recalled another morning when the two of them had sat in the smoke-blue library, arguing over long sheets of figures and trying to determine the fate of Newbridge.

"If I'm to let the place for five years, it must be to somebody I know or know about," he resumed, as they filed through a window into the south courtyard. "Apart from ordinary wear and tear, I don't want Newbridge to get into the hands of some genial beanfeaster who'll make a nuisance of himself to all my neighbours."

"You need have no fear of that," the solicitor reassured him. "Do you want me to do anything about your flat in London, or are you keeping that on in case you ever come back unexpectedly?"

"No, I want you to get rid of that. As I shall always take the best part of a month to get home, I can cable before sailing and get you to find me some kind of accommodation. I don't expect to be home at all; and I don't want you to send for me, unless the place is burnt down or the world comes to an end or something like that."

"Five years. . . . It's a long time," mused the solicitor. "We shall see great changes by then if we're still alive. If they're bad years, they'll bring the end of the big country-houses of England."

"Mr. May-Kingston will tell you it's no use my going for less," Norman explained, as he prepared to return to the house. "I'll just see how my wife is getting on with her share of the muddle."

Ever since he had brought Margery to Gloucestershire a

fortnight before, Norman had been administering himself as a tonic every hour or so throughout the day : the shadow which he now contrived to keep at a distance from her mind always threatened to come back if he stayed away even for the whole of a morning, and, though she no longer feared that he would abandon her, she needed to be constantly assured of his love. Her dependence on him was measured and recorded on the day when, with the choice of returning to the haunted atmosphere of Newbridge and of remaining in London without him, she found the ghosts and memories of house and park easier to bear than a fortnight's separation.

"I just looked in to see that you weren't tiring yourself," he began, when he found her in her own room, tidying household papers and tearing up old letters. "We've struck work for the rest of the morning, and your father and the attorney are getting up an appetite in the courtyard. Would you care for a little fresh air?"

"Yes! But don't let's go where they are," she pleaded. "I want you all to myself. *Norman*, what a lovely day it is!"

"Yes. . . . I've never seen the place look better."

At the irrepressible note of yearning in his voice, Margery winced and bit her lip :

"I *will* stay if you want to! It's not too late. When I think of all that Newbridge means to you, all that you've done for me . . . and the way I've repaid it . . ."

Before she could finish her sentence Norman drew her into his arms and kissed her :

"My child, what are you talking about? I thought you gave me a little promise : we were to think only of the future, and you were to get well and not worry . . ."

"But this place . . ."

"We can come back to it whenever we like. Just now a change will be good for both of us. Your father's quite right : we've seen extraordinarily little of the world." . . .

"Does he know why you're taking this appointment?" Margery interrupted timidly. "D'you think he ever suspects?"

"No. It's what he's been urging me to do for months. I . . . I jumped at the opportunity. When we're the other side of the world . . . I've no idea what South America's like ; have you? I remember the first night we met, at that theatre, we had a geography-competition. . . . Whatever it's like, it will all be so different that it will be like starting our married life again. All we shall remember will be what we choose to remember :

Norman Edgar . . . the thousand and one times when we were so happy together we could hardly believe we were awake, . . . all our love. . . . I've often wished I could meet you again for the first time, Margie. And in a way that's happening . . . I wished I could live again through that evening in your house when I realized I was in love with you . . . and when I found, . . . though it was too much to believe at first, that you were in love with me too. . . . And that's happened, Margie: I've seen . . . the dawn of love . . . a second time."

As he tried to lead her downstairs, she threw her arms round his neck:

"But *I'm* not the same, Norman!"

"I don't think anything could change you. . . . And nothing could ever change my love for you."

It was their last day but one before moving with all their luggage to London and, a week later, to Southampton. After a hurried luncheon, Margery went back to her clothes and papers, while Norman closeted himself in the library first with his solicitor and then with May-Kingston. Not until dinner-time had he made his last arrangements; and not until dinner was over could he escape with his own thoughts.

Then, as always, the square flat roof above the lantern promised him complete isolation. Pacing slowly from corner to corner, looking down on the grey stone cross from north and south, east and west, he bade farewell to his kingdom for five years or ten or as many more as any one chose to keep him exiled. Perhaps in five years' time Margery could come back without having to hang her head, though never again would she wish or dare to take her place in the life of the county; in less than five years' time the Melbys might have deserted Gloucestershire, Freddie might be dead or divorced; or he might still be alive, they might still be in occupation, still vested with power of prescription.

Presumably the power would pass with the lives of the present generation; in thirty years' time Norman Edgar Cartwright could return to a place where the name of Cartwright was being fast forgotten and where the Cartwright tradition was dying out.

Looking over the grey, moon-lit grass to the shadowy heights of Poplar Ridge, Norman tried for the thousandth time to find reason or right in the punishment that had been accorded him for trying to live on terms of friendship with his neighbour: first Gloria, then Margery, now Newbridge were taken from him.

"I *don't* see what I've done to deserve it." . . .

As though he had been caught red-handed in crime, Norman started guiltily on finding that he was brooding and murmuring as he had sworn that he would never brood or murmur again. The past, as he had told Margery, was dead and forgotten; he had stolen away to say good-bye to it; the time was now come for him to hail the future with a cheer.

When he returned to the library, the others were choosing books and preparing to separate for the night; he was aware that Margery was watching him and that his expression and voice threatened momentarily to betray him.

"Well, . . . this time to-morrow we shall be in London," he reminded her, as they went up to bed. "It's been a tiring job, I'm glad it's all over. Are you looking forward to the voyage?"

"Yes, . . . if I didn't know what it cost you to leave Newbridge."

"I'm fond of the place. . . ," he admitted indifferently.

"But you *love* it! More than anything in the world." . . .

"No. . . . That was true once, but I've a better idea of values than I had. I love Newbridge, . . . but I love you more. And I regret nothing that's taught me that." . . .

He paused to wonder whether his tone carried conviction. Margery wondered, too.

THE END



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